

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

**Author's Note** – *This story takes place immediately after Under the Radar.*

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## **"Public Relations"**

A *Gunslinger Girl* Original Fiction by Kiskaloo

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### **Chapter One – Hunting High and Low**

"And I want to thank the fine work of our special operations unit in striking this blow against those who seek to sunder the unity of this great Republic and wage a campaign of terror against its good citizens," the Prime Minister's image intoned as he stood before a rostrum at the Palazzo Chigi in Rome.

All across Italy, the heads of the various counter-terrorist and special forces units each wondered whom amongst their peers had struck this particular blow, for they knew it was not themselves.

And they were generally not happy about that fact.

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The SWA was not the only agency with moles inside the Five Republics and an event as important as the meeting of the five most senior surviving PRF members in Lombardy was leaked to a number of agencies. These agencies then leaked it amongst each other and eventually everyone knew that it was slated to happen, even if most didn't know where and when. And they all knew that being a part of a successful prosecution would raise their stature both amongst their peers and within the Cabinet of Ministers, gaining them a greater share of funding and personnel.

As such, when the Prime Minister went on national television to announce the raid, all of the agencies began to contact each other to find out who had pulled it off, partly out of interest, but mostly out of a sense of annoyance at being denied a "piece of the action".

The hunt was on for who had robbed them of a shot at glory.

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Within about a week, everyone knew that this mission had not been carried out by any of "the usual suspects". That left three options: an external agency, a specially compartmented unit in one of "the usual suspects" who were keeping their mouths shut or a new player that none of them had known about.

The external agencies – including France's DGSE, Germany's GSG 9 and Spain's GEO – were quickly eliminated and a check of NATO flight logs showed that no military movements from outside of Italy relating to special forces (Britain's SAS, for example) had occurred within a few days prior or after the mission.

SISDE came under special scrutiny because Special Operations Section 2 often masqueraded as being from that unit when doing inter-agency operations. As such, many within the Italian counter-terrorist community felt that they were hiding a new and secret unit that had undertaken the mission, though the SISDE denied it.

An Aeronautica Militare Sottotenente at Air Force Headquarters discovered a flight of a C-130-30 Super Hercules of the 504<sup>th</sup> Gruppo of the 4° Stormo from Roma-Pratica di Mare Air Base to Piacenza-San Damiano Air Base and then back. The 504<sup>th</sup> was the Logistic Operative Services group for the 4<sup>th</sup> wing, which meant that something was flown from Pratica di Mare to Piacenza-San Damiano and then back. Also, Piacenza-San Damiano normally didn't handle the Hercules. Their LSO group - 550° Gruppo – was equipped with Alenia G.222 transports so whatever went to the base was larger than would fit in a G.222. This meant it was likely vehicles of some type.

What really piqued the interest of the Sottotenente, however, was that it was classified as a "Special Assignment Airlift Mission" which meant that that flight and plane were chosen to satisfy a requirement needing special consideration because of the number of passengers, weight or size of the cargo, urgency, sensitivity of movement, or other special factors. This flight was designated STALLONE ORO / BRAVO Standby which meant the mission was supporting the Office of the Minister of Defense directly and the aircraft and aircrew were capable of departing within three hours after notification.

The Sottotenente knew this was "above his pay grade" and as such he informed his Capitano. The Capitano was intrigued, as well, because, normally, such missions were handled by the 531° Gruppo SLO attached to 31° Stormo at Rome Ciampino airport. Before his current assignment at Air Force HQ, the Capitano has been part of the 531°,

whom maintained the aircraft used by the Government and the Holy See and they also had the Hercules in their inventory. So why did the flight originate out of Pratica di Mare, which was a smaller air base without VIP facilities? He researched some more and saw that the flight had been requested by, and had been under the command of, a Tenente Colonnello Michele Pagani. He inspected Colonnello Pagani's dossier and found that he was a reserve officer who had left active duty some four years prior. This really piqued his interest, but a Capitano did not just call up a Tenente Colonnello – even in the Reserves – and start asking him questions. He brought it to the attention of his Maggiore who took it directly to the Colonnello who had ordered the search in the first place.

Colonnello Guglielmo Basile did not get to his position by being rash in either thought or action. He therefore first contacted the Base Operations Officer of Piacenza-San Damiano. The BOO was in charge of handling aircraft movement and storage at an air base. The BOO reported that a C-130-30J from the 550° Gruppo out of Pratica di Mare filed a SAAM flight-plan four hours prior to arrival with instructions that the plane be stored in a hangar for a period of a few hours at which point it would then depart back to Pratica di Mare. The base only had two hangars large enough to handle a plane the size of the Hercules, so he ordered the smaller one cleared out and made it available. When the Colonnello asked why he had agreed to such a disruption of his operations, the CO replied that the orders included a copy of a letter from the Ministry of Defense stating that any and all assistance was to be rendered to the aircraft commander, who the Colonnello knew was this Tenente Colonnello Pagani.

The BOO continued, informing Basile that three civilian vehicles then exited the plane and left the air base. He identified the vehicles as a Toyota Land Cruiser and two vans, one belonging to a telecommunications company and another to an energy company. While the Land Cruiser's windows were blacked-out, the Sergente Maggiore overseeing the unloading swore he saw two girls in the third row. The Primo Aviere Capo manning the gatehouse confirmed that Colonnello Pagani was driving the Land Cruiser when it both exited and returned, which was a few hours later that evening.

Colonnello Basile thanked him and then called the BOO at Pratica di Mare. The BOO there said much the same – that a Colonnello Pagani had arrived leading three civilian automobiles that had boarded the Super Hercules and flown to Piacenza-San Damiano and then back.

The next logical course of action would be to contact the Ministry of Defense and find out what mission they had Pagani performing, however what was logical and what was practical – even sensible – were not always the same. Instead, he contacted the Commanding Officer of Milano-Linate Air Base, which was where Colonnello Pagani performed his reserve service, to find out where the good Colonnello currently worked.

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Colonnello Basile wasn't the only person looking into the past and present of a former "brother in arms" who was no longer part of their "family".

At the Direzione Centrale della Polizia di Prevenzione, a few of Marco Togni's former comrades remembered that he had supposedly gone to work for some social agency, which didn't fit his character at all. Not to mention his girlfriend had left him, which made even less sense to them now that he was out of harm's way.

The GIS also remembered that two of their former members, Jean Croce and his superior, Captain Raballo, had both gone to work for some strange group. They also remembered that Croce's brother, Giuseppe, had left the Carabinieri for the same group.

And all these agencies started to do their own internal investigations. And word of them started to drift back to Minister Petris.

## Chapter Two – Blowback

In the Intelligence community, there was a term for the negative consequences of undertaking an action – “blowback”. And right now, Section 2 was trying to prevent from being caught in their own blowback from the mission at Castelverde. They’d gotten wind of the inquiries on their people being passed around and decided they needed to take immediate action to prevent it from being traced back to them before they could contain it.

“We’re going to have to lay low for a bit,” Director Lorenzo noted to Jean Croce as the two sat in his office.

“We can give everyone a week off,” Jean suggested.

“Do it,” Lorenzo ordered. “Try and convince them to head out into the countryside or, better yet, out of the country.”

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Italy was literally awash in counter-terrorist groups. The Army, Navy and Air Force each had their own special forces unit. The Carabinieri had the GIS (or Special Intervention Group) and the ROS (Special Operations Group) and the Polizia di Stato had the DCPP (Central Directorate for the Anti-Terrorism Police), consisting of both the DIGOS (Division of General Investigations and Special Operations) and the NOCS (Central Security Operations Service). And then there were the units of the Guardia di Finanza tasked to the role plus still more units of other policing forces. Italy even had two domestic intelligence services – SISDE ((Intelligence and Democratic Security Service) under the Ministry of the Interior and SISMI (Military Intelligence and Security Service) under the Ministry of Defense.

With so many groups, there was significant competition for resources – both monetary and personnel. Then there were also the conflicting “fields of interest” between the military and civilian groups – made more difficult by the fact that the Carabinieri, while a police force, were military personnel who were under the authority of the Ministry of Defense as opposed to the Polizia di Stato, the Guardia di Finanza and the other “civilian” police forces who were under the authority of the Ministry of the Interior. This resulted in convoluted and unclear chains of command that hindered effective combined operations. And so many groups made for a larger and richer environment for graft and corruption to take root. The Padania Republican Faction in the north followed the tradition of the Mafioso in the south, bribing civilian

and military police and officials as well as supporting the election and appointment of "pro-Padania" government officials who themselves then influenced the civilian bureaucracy and police forces they administered. An effective assassination campaign against those who could not be bribed also helped cow many others to "look the other way" or not get involved. All of this resulted in an uncoordinated and ineffective response by Rome to the threat raised by the PRF.

The Padania Republican Faction arose around the turn of the millennium. They owed their existence in part to the Lega Nord party, founded in 1991 to promote the independence or autonomy of northern Italy. Lega Nord had their greatest political success in the 1996 general election and with this result, they chose to not be part of the winning "Olive Tree" coalition government and instead announced their intent to remain separate and to also introduce a referendum on independence that would result in Northern Italy seceding from the Republic and becoming the independent country of Padania. However, both this referendum and an attempt to form an independent "Padanian Parliament" were unsuccessful and the official position of Lega Nord seeking independence for Padania from the Italian Republic ended. Instead, the new goal became to transform Italy from a parliamentary republic to a federal state. They also advocated for more fiscal autonomy for the northern regions and the institution of fiscal federalism to better control how monies flowed from the regions to the government and back to the regions.

This stance did not sit well with many powerful people in the northern regions who were dead-set against the policies that resulted in the wealth the North generated being sent to the central and southern regions of the Republic to prop them up. To them, such actions were both unfair and unsustainable. They had their own issues that needed to be dealt with and they did not feel that billions of their dollars should be siphoned off for projects like the Straight of Massina Bridge that brought no benefit to the northern regions. As such, with what they felt was the "selling out" of their interests by Lega Nord and the failure of the autonomy referendum, they set about gaining by force what they could not gain through the legislature and the Padania Republican Faction was born.

The move by the PRF also ignited separatist feelings in other parts of Italy and new pro-independence groups sprang up in Lazio, Campania, Calabria, Sardinia and Sicily. These groups eventually formed a loose cooperation known as "The Five Republics Faction" as their stated goal

was to break Italy apart into five autonomous republics centered around Rome, Naples, Milan, Sardinia and Sicily.

The current Prime Minister was head of Italy's largest media company, with almost 70% of the television, radio and periodical news reporting entities in the country were under his direct control. He used this power and influence to form a new political party that won a significant plurality in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate of the Republic. Combined with wins by the parties of his coalition partners, he was elected Prime Minister by a vote of both chambers. However, the Five Republics presented a problem for him. He'd run on a platform of law and order and an active terrorist rebellion in the northern regions was a black eye. Also the fact that many wealthy and important northern industrialists were voicing at least private support for the Five Republics didn't help. While his coalition was currently strong enough to survive any Votes of Confidence cast against it, he did have to worry about an erosion of support within the Parliament if things grew worse.

Into all of this came the Social Welfare Organization. Created as a government-sponsored corporation administered directly by the Prime Minister's office, its public face was working with physically challenged and severely ill or injured children. It brought together the finest medical minds in Italy and together they had advanced medical science significantly in the area of biomedical engineering, including cybernetics, prostheses, neuroprosthetics and biomechatronics.

Its private face was as a counter-intelligence and counter-terrorism group answerable directly to the Prime Minister and operating under his orders alone, outside any other ministry. It was hoped such an independent agency could operate far more effectively, efficiently – and clandestinely. To help protect their secrecy, they were issued credentials that had them assigned to other groups, including SISDE, NOCS, DPS (Department of Public Security) and the military.

This private face was organized along two parts. The first was Public Safety, headed by Alfonso Reschiglian. The primary focus of Public Safety was "passive" - surveillance, intelligence and espionage. The other half was Special Operations. Special Operations maintained an "active" focus, including protective custody, protective security, hostage rescue, and sanctions. Special Operations was itself sub-divided into two sections. Section 1, under the direction of Giulio Draghi, employed human agents. When it was founded, Section 2 also used human agents, however the medical advances coming out of the

public-side of the SWA program inspired Section 2 Director Pieri Lorenzo to create a child cyborg assassin. The reasoning was simple – terrorists were likely to ignore or lower their guard around a child, allowing them to get close enough to execute their mission – and their opponent. Also, by augmenting a child with advanced prosthetics and artificial organs, you could create a “super soldier” capable of feats no adult could perform. One could also more easily and effectively mold a child’s mind.

It had been a hard sell to both Minister of Defense Petris and the Prime Minister, but as the Five Republics Faction became both bolder and deadlier, it was decided to create a prototype to investigate whether the idea had any potential. A candidate was found in the SWA system and she had most of her body replaced with artificial systems, including skeleton, musculature, and major organs. She was then taken to a former boarding school now housing Public Safety and Special Operations and trained as a soldier. Based on the results of her testing, three additional girls were identified and added to the program and were sent into the field, where they performed generally well. Soon after, six more girls were identified and converted.

At first, only Special Operations was made fully aware of the scope of the cyborg program. Even Public Safety was initially kept in the dark about the true nature of the program, though eventually they became aware of it when cyborgs started to work beside them on special missions. Special Operations Section 1, who had enjoyed being the “lead” unit in the early days, now found themselves being assigned more mundane missions as the cyborgs of Section 2 were given more and more of the “plum” counter-terrorist missions that had originally been the sole province of Section 1. This caused friction between the two groups, most particularly between Directors Draghi and Lorenzo. It did not help matters that the Minister of Defense, Monica Petris, had herself become enamored of the abilities of the cyborgs as their exploits improved her position in the eyes of the Prime Minister. Her goals were higher than her current position, so she hitched her cart to what she felt was the stronger horse.



### **Chapter Three – Out of Sight, Out of Mind**

“Always nice to be rewarded for a job well done,” Alessandro noted as he, Hillshire, Marco and Michele had lunch in the handler’s dining room, enjoying Michele’s fettuccine al burro e panna, which he had prepared for Kara since she was still on a restricted diet.

“Jean presented it almost more like an order than a reward,” Hillshire noted. “Plus the prohibition of us using anything but our Agency phones to communicate, and then only with him. It’s like he wants us to disappear for a bit.”

“It’s possible the other groups didn’t take well to being shut out,” Marco opined. “If so, they’re likely trying to find out who pulled the trigger and the Director and Croce want to be sure none of us are available to answer any questions they might want to ask.”

“How would they find out if we don’t talk?” Alessandro asked as he re-filled his plate from the tray.

“Draghi,” Michele suggested, remembering a few years back when the Director of Special Operations, Section 1 had asked him to look into the cyborg program for any “dirt” that could be used against it.

“I am sure Minister Petris has him under a gag order,” Hillshire noted, adding some additional pepper and Parmesan cheese to his pasta.

“That doesn’t mean one of his people can leak the suggestion that Section 2 might have played a role,” Michele said. “That order from the Ministry of Defense I was waiving around wasn’t exactly the definition of ‘subtle’, either.”

“Well, whatever the reason, I am looking forward to some time off with Petrushka,” Alessandro said, causing Hillshire to choke on his wine and Marco’s face to take on a sour expression. Michele merely put his head in his hand.

“What?” Alessandro asked.

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After lunch, Michele and Hillshire returned to their desks in the Section 2 offices.

"Is this the car you're going to get Kara?" Hillshire asked, pointing to the brochure for the 2006 Alfa Romeo 147GTA.

"I am considering it, since I would like something a bit smaller for the city. And it doesn't hurt that she does have her heart set on one."

"What do you plan to do with your week off?" Hillshire asked.

"I'm taking Kara to Paris. We were only able to spend the weekend there after she left surgery, so I want to give her some more time in her hometown. She was born and raised in France, but her mother was Japanese so she has ties to that nation, as well, so we're going to Tokyo and Kyoto for Christmas."

Hillshire sighed. "Now that we have next week off, I really need to get back to Germany and visit my parents. My mother has been haranguing me to move home for years now, but they don't know about Triela and, frankly, I don't know how to explain her to them. Unfortunately, the Director seemed to be pretty clear that he wanted us to take the girls, as well, so I can't leave her behind to keep Claes company."

"Have her come to Paris with Kara and I," Michele offered.

"That's nice of you, Michele, but you and Kara should have some time together alone."

"It really wouldn't be a problem," Michele noted. "I plan to spend my time visiting museums, so she and Kara can hang out and do whatever it is girls their age do. Consider it a humanitarian gesture to save Kara from dying of boredom. And they both seemed to have had fun together at Monza."

"It's tempting, except I am not sure when I could get to Paris," Hillshire noted.

"Well I'm leaving the Piaggio in Paris so my plans are flexible. Heck, we can meet you in Berlin if that works."

"Won't that be out of your way?" Hillshire asked.

"Not really. I wouldn't mind showing them Berlin," Michele noted.

"Thank you, Michele. I really appreciate it," Hillshire replied.

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Outside in the afternoon sun, Triela, Claes and Kara were practicing football under the watchful eye of Giorgio. Kara was manning the goal and Triela and Claes took turns shooting at her. Triela was dressed in the away uniform of FC Bayern Munich from the German Fußball-Bundesliga league, Claes wore the home colors of AIK Fotboll from the Swedish Allsvenskan and the away uniform of FC Barcelona in the Spanish La Liga adorned Kara. Kara and Triela were huge fans of Italian Serie A football, Kara supporting A.C. Milan and Triela A.S. Roma. Claes' interest was very weak, but Triela continued to work on her and she had attended the Roma vs. Milan game at Stadio Olimpico with Triela and Kara and their handlers. They all followed the UEFA Champions League and UEFA Cup championships, however 2004 had ended up being a disappointing season for them.

"Triela, can I see you for a moment?" Hillshire called, and Triela jogged over and he told her the arrangements that had been made.

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"You're looking rather monochromatic this morning," Claes noted as Triela pulled on black boots to match her black sweater and black skirt. Outside, the skies were still dark, as the sun had not yet risen.

"This whole thing was rather sudden so I didn't have time to bat my eyes at Pricilla and get a new wardrobe," Triela said with a grin.

Claes grabbed one of her pillows and chucked it at Triela, hitting her square in the face.

"You're welcome to anything they bought me. I don't expect I'll ever wear them again," Claes noted.

"Thanks, but Kara offered to loan me some of hers since we're close in size. I still feel bad leaving you behind alone while everyone else is on vacation."

"I'll be fine, Triela. Really. Go enjoy yourself and you can bore me with the details when you get back."

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Kara was fixing the buttons on her light grey button-down shirt when Triela knocked on the door and entered.

"Almost ready," Kara said. She grabbed the long black skirt off the back of the chair and pulled it on, zipping it up on the side. She then pulled on a pair of burgundy leather boots.

"I'm so jealous," Gattonero pouted from the other bed. "Getting to go to glamorous Paris while Yarrow is taking me to boring old Turin."

"Turin's a nice city," Kara opinioned.

"To ski, yes, but it's too warm for that," Gattonero replied.

"Petrushka's getting to go to Venice with her handler," she added, causing Triela and Kara to make choking sounds.

"Well try and have fun, Gattonero," Kara said. "I'll bring you back some gifts." She hoisted her Ferrari F1 team travel bag and followed Triela out of the room.

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Dawn broke as Amadeo drove Triela, Kara and Michele out to Ciampino and they boarded the P.180.

"Take the co-pilots seat, Triela," Kara instructed once they had boarded.

"Seriously?" Triela asked.

"Yup. I have my pilot's license, now, so I don't need the practice. And how many chances will you get to experience a take-off and landing from the front office?" Kara said with a smile. The previous month she had completed the necessary training to become a private pilot with amendments necessary to make her qualified to fly the P.180 without Michele needing to be present in the cockpit.

Triela made her way forward and carefully eased into the right seat and Michele helped her strap in. He contacted Ciampino tower and taxied to the runway. The field was still in shadow and all the lights were on.

"Ready?" he asked Triela, who nodded her head. Michele advanced the throttles and the plane started its roll. As they rotated off the runway, Michele increased the angle of attack and the plane rose steeply and sharply into the sky. Triela let out a yelp and Kara smiled, remembering she had done much the same herself when Michele had pulled the same maneuver on their first flight together.

"The view is so much more impressive than through the tiny windows on an airliner," Triela noted an hour later as she sipped on the cocoa Kara had brought forward. They were flying at 12,000m to keep above the majority of commercial traffic crossing the continent, and on occasion they could see contrails below them and Triela would use a pair of binoculars to see the planes themselves making them.

"What do you love more, racing or flying?" she asked.

"Flying," Michele replied immediately.

"You didn't even stop to think about that response," Triela noted.

"Second only to Kara, it is the greatest joy in my life."

Before Triela could respond, the radio crackled. "India-Whiskey-Oscar-Lima-Foxtrot, Provence Center. Alitalia 631 wishes to speak with you. Contact them on 127.38."

Michele acknowledged the call and tuned to the frequency.

"Alitalia 631, India-Whiskey-Oscar-Lima-Foxtrot is with you on 127.38."

"Nice morning to be flying, isn't it, *nipote*?" Captain Alberto Pagani noted.

"Ciao, *zio*!" Michele replied to his uncle. "Is that your 77E off our port wing?"

"It is indeed, nephew. We're inbound from MIA and I heard your call to Provence Center so I've had my co-pilot on the glasses looking for you."

Triela tapped Michele on the shoulder. "Your uncle flies airliners?" she asked.

"Yes, the Boeing 777 for Alitalia."

"Is Kara with you?" Alberto asked.

"Yes, she's in back. Let me get her," Michele said and flipped a switch that activated a chime in the main cabin. Kara appeared a moment later.

"Your uncle is on the radio," Michele said. Kara nodded and removed a spare headset and plugged it in.

"*Ohaiyo ojisan!*" she sang out.

"How's my favorite niece doing?"

"Very well, thank you. We're going to Paris for a few days on vacation."

Alberto Pagani was the brother of Nicola, Michele's father. He had flown Panavia Tornados for the Aeronautica Militare and was the person who planted the seed for a love of flying in Michele. He left the AM in the early 1990's to join Alitalia and now commanded one of their four Boeing 777-243ER airliners.

"Well have a great time and send me plenty of pictures. Ciao!" Alberto said, signing off and preparing for the final approach to Rome.

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A little over two hours after they had departed Rome, the Piaggio settled down on Runway 09 at Paris' Le Bourget Airport. They exited the plane and into the back of a Mercedes S500 which drove them to the Park Hyatt Paris-Vendôme hotel.

"Claes wasn't exaggerating, was she?" Triela whispered to Kara as they walked in to the large Diplomatic Suite. Through the doors leading to the terrace they could see the Place Vendôme and the Eifel Tower and a fire glowed cheerfully in the fireplace.

"Being his cyborg does have its advantages," she admitted.

"Well Hillshire doesn't skimp on the accommodations, either, but this is impressive," Triela noted.

"Do you mind sharing a bed with Kara? Or should I have a second one brought up?" Michele asked Triela. He'd reserved an attached room, but it only had a single king bed.

"I'm sure she can manage," Kara said.

"That's right," Triela concurred. "Plus if you two want to...well, you know...that would be great because then I can have the bed to myself," she teased, causing Kara to scowl and Michele to put his hand to his face.

"Well Paris is known as the City of Love," Triela informed them, trying to look her most innocent – and failing miserably.

"I'm going to spend today at the Louvre," Michele noted as they enjoyed breakfast out on the terrace. "You two are free to do whatever you like. I made dinner reservations at 19:00 at Le Jules Verne in the middle of the Eiffel Tower so we should meet back here no later than 18:00. After dinner we can head up to the observation deck at the top and view the city."

"I want to go to the Louvre, too," Triela interrupted. Beside her, Kara nodded her head as well.

"Seriously?" Michele asked and both girls again said so.

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"Rico would have to wear an Arctic parka in this place," Triela joked as they examined the Italian paintings in the Grande Galerie of the Denon wing of the museum. Rico had remarked on more than one occasion that fine art gave her the chills and the Louvre was one of the great storehouses of such things.

When they reached the paintings of Dutch master Godfried Schalcken, all three spent the better part of 20 minutes captivated by his use of shadow and light. He was noted for his mastery in reproducing the effect of candlelight and all three could easily see why. They stayed until just before closing time at 18:00. Even with some seven hours, it had been a rush to try and take it all in.

They walked back to the hotel and changed into formal attire for dinner before the rode a cab to the Eiffel Tower to enjoy dinner as they watched the sunset. They then rode the elevator to the top and enjoyed the view for a bit before heading back down and walking along the Parc du Champs de Mars and boarded the Paris Métro which they rode to the Arc de Triomphe. They went to the top of that famous structure and then back down again, boarding the Metro to the Place de la Concorde. They walked down the Tuileries Garden and past the Louvre, crossed over to Île de la Cité and walked along it to Notre

Dame de Paris cathedral. They then caught a cab back to the hotel where they had drinks in Le Bar before returning to the suite and preparing for bed.

"Sure you don't want to spend the night with Michele?" Triela asked as she and Kara changed out of their clothes and into pajamas.

"I've always wondered if a Series 1 cyborg's artificial lungs are strong enough to draw a breath through a pillow," Kara noted.

"No need to get grouchy," Triela said.

"I don't find it funny, Triela. Michele is my adopted father."

"That's just a piece of paper, same as our identity cards and passports," Triela replied. "The only reason they do it is so people don't ask questions why a 30-year old man is with a 13-year old girl when they check into a hotel or are stopped by the police for a traffic infraction."

"It's different with Michele and I," Kara protested.

"Hillshire and I have been together for close to five years," Triela stated. "I know what makes him, and men in general, tick. So don't try to tell me it's all innocence on your part. You want Michele to notice you. That is a natural reaction for a girl around a guy she likes. I remember your first outfits – t-shirts, jeans and athletic shoes. But once you were allowed to choose your own clothes, you immediately went for designer fashions and make-up because you wanted Michele to notice you as more than just 'daddy's little girl'."

"If you ever tire of being an assassin, you'd make a decent psychoanalyst," Kara quipped.

"When you walked down the Champs-Élysées tonight, nobody saw a teenaged girl with her father. They saw a young adult with her boyfriend or fiancé."

"That's daft," Kara said, sitting down on her edge of the bed. Triela laid stomach-down on the other side and looked at her.

"The way you dress and carry yourself, you look to be in your early twenties. Heck, even when you're in shorts and a t-shirt loafing around the compound you look years older than you actually are. The benefit



of being Asian, I guess, but don't tell me you don't try and leverage that advantage to appear older than seventeen."

Kara couldn't, so she didn't bother to answer. Instead, she slipped under the covers on her side of the bed and turned off her light. Triela shrugged and did the same.

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They spent most of the following day at the Palace of Versailles and the surrounding gardens. That evening they attended a Ligue 1 football game between Paris Saint-Germain Football Club and the Toulouse Football Club at Parc des Princes stadium before returning to the hotel for dinner in the suite watching movies by the fire.

They slept late the morning of the third day and enjoyed a nice buffet breakfast at Les Orchidées in the hotel. One of the other co-owners of the Piaggio was in Paris and would fly the plane on to Copenhagen and then back to Rome, so they could no longer use it to get around Europe. As such, they had tickets on the 11:55 Thalys high-speed train from Paris Gare du Nord to Köln Hauptbahnhof.

They pulled into Cologne's central railway station just before 16:00 and took a taxi to the Hyatt Regency Cologne. They checked-in and then explored the city for a few hours before returning to the hotel for dinner and then bed.

## Chapter Four – With This Ring...

*I can't breathe.*

That single thought hammered through Triela's mind as her artificial heart hammered in her chest. She tried to move her head, but the acceleration forces pinned her to her seat. The wind roared with the sound of a lion standing beside her, attacking her as it swirled around the Mercedes SL65's open convertible roof like a hurricane.

The view before her was a continual blur of green as a forest of trees whipped by to either side. Before her, a ribbon of grey unwound at a rate she found truly frightening. Her body shifted to the left and she felt the side bolsters of her seat inflate to help hold her in place. She felt the g-forces lessen and took a deep breath before once again she was shoved back into her seat. She thought she heard the word "torque", but couldn't be sure with the noise of the wind mixed with sound of the tires clawing at the road.

It was early morning in the district of Ahrweiler in the western German state of Rhineland-Palatinate. On a hill in the distance was Nürburg Castle, standing proud guard over the city that bore its name. Michele, Triela and Kara were at the famous Nürburgring track, wrapped around the Eifel mountains like icing on an apple strudel. Nicknamed "The Green Hell" by triple-Formula One Champion Sir Jackie Stewart, the track was almost 23 kilometers long and containing by some calculations 175 corners.

And the public could drive on it as fast as they dared for €14 a lap.

The trees to either side gave way and suddenly there was a sharp deceleration and she felt the belts of the harness bite into her as she was thrown forward against them. There was a terrible shrieking and an acrid cloud rose up around her. She slammed back into her seat and lay there for a few moments, her breath coming in deep gasps.

"Are...alright...ela?"

The voice faded in and out, and she cleared her head to concentrate.

"I said, are you alright, Triela?"

She turned to her left and focused on the speaker. His blue eyes sparkled and his face was touched with a sense of exhilaration.

"I...I think so..." she replied, somewhat weakly. She reached for the harness release and shrugged out from the belts. It took her a moment to find the control to open the door, and she leaned out, breathing in the cool air. She heard the clanks of cooling metal and shifted her waist and torso to place her feet on the ground. As she lifted herself out of the seat, she stumbled, and caught the doorjamb for support. She slowly raised herself up and walked to the back of the car, leaning against it.

"Are you sure you are ok?" Michele asked as he stepped towards her. Triela nodded her head and took a deep breath before she looked at Michele.

"Can we go again?" she asked, earning her a smile from Michele.

A few moments later a Ferrari 360 Challenge Stradale tore into the pit complex and Kara stepped out of the passenger seat.

"Oh my god. Oh my god. Oh my god," she repeated as she walked towards Michele, pointing emphatically back towards the car. "We must get one. Now. To Maranello. Now."

"That's a track car, Kara," Michele noted. "It's barely road legal."

"Don't care. The speed. The cornering. The noise. Seriously. Must have. To Maranello. Now."

"Niccolò is going to take you on a lap in his Enzo, so I imagine you'll forget about the Stradale in ten minutes," he noted.

It was a "track day" so a number of car clubs were present and had brought a fleet of exotic cars. Many were friends of Michele's and they spent about two hours driving or being driven in various supercars.

When the last ride had been completed, they returned to their Maybach 62 rental and started towards Berlin via the Autobahn.

"I admit to not being much of a car nut, but that was fun," Triela admitted.

"That was more than fun. That was awesome," Kara retorted. "Ten of the coolest cars on the greatest race track? Truly something special."

"It was also hard on my butt," Triela said as she reclined the back seat to its "flat" position and activated the seat heaters and massage.

"Oh yes, this is nice," she noted a few minutes later.

A little under three hours later they exited Bundesautobahn 115 at the L40 interchange and drove into the city of Potsdam and towards Sanssouci Park, which was a Prussian version of Versailles with multiple palaces and architectural achievements. Their first stop was Sanssouci Palace, built by the Prussian King Frederick the Great in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century as his summer residence. After visiting the interior, they started walking down the terraced gardens towards the great fountain. When they reached the fountain, Kara took off and performed a number of cartwheels on the grass, collapsing in a burst of laughter.

Michele sighed, but it was a sigh of contentment as opposed to one of exasperation.

"Kara is enjoying herself," Triela noted.

"And so she should. She's on vacation, after all," Michele noted.

"Hard to believe she's 17," Triela said, though she was smiling.

"The candle that burns brightest burns shortest, but it does give off a great deal of light," Michele noted. "Despite all our technology, at best I've only given her another five years or so of life."

"That's five more than she would have had. And when we die, you can just get another cyborg."

Michele firmly shook his head in the negative.

"The doctors say that once a cyborg bonds with a handler, they can never be paired with another. But I think the opposite is true, as well, at least for me. When it is Kara's time to leave the SWA, it will be mine as well," Michele stated. "I can't keep her from harm because her purpose is to go into harm's way. So I have decided that what time we have together will be a time of no regrets. I will do whatever I can to make her happy as often as possible as much as possible," he added.

"You are a somewhat silly person, Michele Pagani," she said. "But you are certainly not a selfish one."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Michele noted.

"You should," Triela suggested.

"This place is wonderful. Thank you for bringing me," Kara said as they caught up with her. "Are you having fun, Triela?"

"Yes. This is a beautiful area and the palace was amazing."

"Well there is plenty more to see. The picture gallery is down that way," he said, pointing through some trees to another, smaller fountain.

"Okay!" Kara said, skipping down the path with Triela following.

They spent most of the afternoon in the complex, visiting all the major sites and buildings and walking along the paths of both Sanssouci Park and the adjoining Charlottenhof Park and Palace. The weather was pleasant and the sun shone brightly and they enjoyed themselves a great deal.

They returned to the car and drove to the Grand Hyatt Berlin located at Potsdamer Platz across from the Berlin Tiergarten. No sooner had they entered the suite then Michele's phone rang and he answered it.

"Perfect timing, Victor. We just arrived...okay...we'll see you then."

"Hillshire is on his way and should be here within the hour. I made reservations for dinner at Margaux up the road, so dress formal," Michele noted.

"Okay. We'll shower and change," Kara said.

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Hillshire pulled into the hotel drive and handed the keys to his E350 to the valet.

He stepped into the lobby and saw Michele reach up and wave at them. The girl's backs were to him, but they turned and saw him approaching and rose to greet him.

Kara wore a burgundy long-sleeve wrap dress matched with black mid-heel pumps. Triela wore a simple black silk button-seam dress with

black dress boots, both borrowed from Kara. Kara was slightly taller than Triela, but of a similar overall build, so with a few tweaks here and there, the dress fit Triela nicely.

"Triela...you look...beautiful," Hillshire complemented her.

"Thank you," Triela said, blushing slightly.

They made their way out front and stepped into the hotel limo, which drove the short way to the restaurant on the Unter den Linden. After dinner they walked down to the Brandenburg Gate, which was brightly lit in the late twilight sky. They sat down on some benches in front of one of the fountains, letting their meal digest. They then grabbed a cab back to the hotel and enjoyed some fine cocktails and fine jazz in the Vox bar till about eleven, when they retired to their respective rooms for the night.

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The following morning they had breakfast at the hotel restaurant and then went out to explore Berlin, visiting the Potsdamer Platz, the Berlin Tiergarten, and the Reichstag. They also stood before the remnants of the Berlin Wall and the various museums located on "Museum Island". Towards evening they took an "architecture tour" via boat along the Spree River that showcased old and new buildings including governmental buildings like the recently refurbished Reichstag and the Bode Museum, built in 1904.

"I want to thank you again for putting up with Triela for most of the week," Hillshire said as he and Michele relaxed in the hotel bar that evening while the girls were out exploring the Platz.

"It was a pleasure to have her," Michele replied.

"Sometimes I think she's a bit too bright for her own good, and it does make her very attuned to a man's desires which means she can be a handful," he added.

"Honestly, she and Kara were great company. I told them they could go off and do what they want, but both preferred to spend time museum hopping with me and they kept each other amused. She was definitely happier once you arrived, though," Michele noted.

"You and Kara have bonded quite quickly. Six months in and you look like you've been together six years," Hillshire noted, deflecting the conversation away from him and Triela.

"It's mostly her. She leads and I follow. She's given me the most precious of gifts – hope. In her eyes I see that magic still exists in this world if you know where to look."

"That's quite a gift," Hillshire noted.

"I saw...terrible things...happen to children when I was in Yugoslavia. Things that filled me with rage and sadness. Things that made me never want to be a father or be responsible for children. Yet Kara has washed all that hate and pain and fear away and I really enjoy being there not just for her, but with her. She's a wonderful person at heart."

Hillshire nodded sagely, privately reflecting on a night in Amsterdam six years prior and the events that followed. He looked up and saw the girls coming up the steps towards the hotel lobby.

"I need to thank Kara for loaning Triela those outfits. I've offered to buy her dresses and different shoes, but she says she likes the suits and boots I have bought her," he noted.

"You're taking to a man born and raised in the fashion capital of Italy, so... Kara has certainly adopted a more fashion-conscious view in her outfits, but then she's Japanese so she stands out no matter what she is wearing. Hopefully people just think she's a trendy tourist from Tokyo. You noted that Triela is sensitive to a man's desires. She sees you dress conservatively and perhaps she wants to emulate that look," Michele opinioned.

The girls came in and Hillshire motioned for the check. They wished Michele and Kara a good night and headed for their room.

## Chapter Five - Chasing Shadows

All Colonnello Basile had been able to get out of the Commanding Officer of Milano-Linate Air Base was that Tenente Colonnello Pagani had an apartment in downtown Milan, drove a Ferrari, and performed his Reserve duties to the highest standards expected of an officer of his grade. As to where Pagani worked, all the CO knew was it was "for the Ministry of the Interior".

Basile knew the SISDE was part of the Ministry of the Interior and the odds in the informal betting pool going around favored the domestic intelligence agency as being behind the strike.

"So why would the Ministry of Defense loan them the planes and not demand some of their own to accompany the mission?" He asked his aide.

"Well the Ministry itself has access only to helicopters and, via the Guardia di Finanza, a handful of small passenger transports," Basile's aide noted.

"True," Basile admitted. "But one would think such a mission would have been cleared through CESIS, no?"

The Comitato Esecutivo per i Servizi di Informazione e Sicurezza was a government committee whose mission was the coordination of information gathered by the respective civilian and military intelligence agencies (SISDE and SISMI) and report all relevant information collected by it to the political Authorities, represented by the Prime Minister. And one of the members who sat on the CESIS was the Chief of the General Staff of the Italian Ministry of Defense and the best Basile had been able to determine, the Generale had not been informed of the mission, either.

"Maybe the Ministers collaborated directly?" the aide hypothesized. "Kind of a *quid pro quo* deal, where Defense helps Interior now, and Interior repays the favor at a later date?"

"You certainly have a nose for politics, Stefano. You'll make a good deputati for your district. It is possible, but they would have had to clear it with the Prime Minister. Any luck on contacting Pagani?"

"No, sir. We've tried his home and work phones and both connect to his work voicemail. We've also called the Interior Ministry front desk to



try and find what department he is in, but the automated system only allows us to enter their name and when we speak to a live operator, they claim the only information they have shows his name and extension."

"Have you tried to trace the extension through Telecom Italia?" Basile asked.

"Yes sir. It goes into the Interior Ministry's trunk line. After that, Ministry telecom staff administer it."

"This sounds more and more like an SISDE operation all the time..." Basile noted.

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"I assure you, Mr. Secretary, that SISDE had nothing to do with this operation," the Director of SISDE stated to the Secretary General of CESIS on the other end of the phone as he sat in his downtown Rome office.

"I don't care what my esteemed colleague in SISMI is implying. Our charter doesn't allow us to undertake such missions anymore than his does. I understand, Mr. Secretary. Thank you, sir. Good day." He hung up the phone and let out a loud sigh as he clenched and then unclenched his fists.

"This has got to stop," he said to the ceiling. He leaned forward and hailed his assistant.

"Connect me with the Interior Ministry," he ordered.

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"The Prime Minister is going to have to say something, Monica," Pieri Lorenzo stated.

"Feeling the heat a little too much?" Giulio Draghi noted as he reached for his wine glass. As Director of Section One, Giulio continued to smart at what he considered the usurpation of his Section's rightful position by the cyborgs of Section 2. As such, he enjoyed seeing his peer's discomfort.

"What reflects on Section 2 reflects equally on Section 1," Monica Petris, the Minister of Defense, noted from the head of the table. "If their cover is blown, so is yours. And the last thing the Prime Minister

needs is revelations that he's been running his own private counter-terrorism unit under the cover of a public works initiative. Not to mention what the press will say when they discover that some of the members are children who have been turned into half-robotic assassins."

Every Tuesday the three met to discuss each Section's respective status over lunch. Monica and Alfonso Reschiglian, head of Public Safety, had a separate meeting on Wednesday and she then dined with the PM on Thursday.

"With respect, Monica, you were the one who convinced the Prime Minister to allow Lorenzo's kids to line-jump to the front of the queue," Draghi said.

While what Petris had stated was true, Draghi also knew that Section One, being a more...traditional...force, would not come under the scrutiny of Lorenzo's cyborg children should their combined existence be leaked to the press. As such, he might be able to successfully weather the storm. It was not something he intended to find out of his own volition, so he had been explicitly clear to his staff that there would be no leaks, even anonymously. And his staff knew better than to cross him.

"As I was saying," Lorenzo continued. "A private word from the PM to the Council of Ministers to themselves circulate a private word about stopping their investigations should be enough to nip this in the bud and let my people come in from the cold."

## **Chapter Six – Best. Day. Ever.**

Rather than pack still more clothes, Kara and Michele had their outfits from the flight to Paris cleaned and pressed by the hotel laundry so Kara was back in her grey shirt and black dress with the burgundy boots the morning of their departure back to Italy. They met Hillshire and Triela for breakfast and as they stepped out into the hotel driveway, Kara stopped dead in her tracks when the squat red and black car stopped in front of Michele.

"No way," she said. "No. Way." She looked to Michele, who just raised his right eyebrow.

"How?" she asked, her face a mask of confusion. He'd told her the night before he'd gotten something "special" for them to drive back to Milan, but this was much, much more than that.

"It's for a friend of mine in Italy. He couldn't come up and get it, but when he found out I was in Germany, he asked if I'd bring it home for him," Michele said.

"You're shitting me," Kara said. She rarely swore, but she could not comprehend any friend, no matter how close, loaning their brand-new €1.000.000 supercar that they themselves had not yet driven. Nobody was that selfless – especially someone with the money to own such a car.

"As an Italian and a Catholic my faith tells me that sometimes, miracles happen. This is one of those times," Michele noted.

When she had been Kumari Rosier, Kara has been exposed to both French Catholicism and Japanese Shinto. Since her rebirth as Kara Pagani, she was an atheist, though she had accompanied Michele to Easter Mass at Saint Peters to experience the pomp and ceremony of a Papal High Mass. As such, Kara shook her head, indicating she wasn't buying it.

"There's more to this story."

"Yes, but it's none of your business. If you don't want to take it, I'll just have them put it back on the transporter and we can fly home on Lufthansa."

"No! No! No! We should be gracious and not disrespect your friend's generosity," Kara said, waving her hands. She suddenly had an idea of who it might be and he was indeed a generous friend – more so than she had thought by the looks of the car sitting in front of her.

"What's the big deal?" Triela asked, confused. "It's a car. A nice-looking car, I'll admit, but still..."

"This is the Bugatti Veyron 16.4, the most powerful production car ever built," Kara noted.

"So?" Triela asked.

"So it will accelerate from 0 to 100km/h in less than three seconds with a top speed of 400km/h."

"400!" Hillshire exclaimed. The top speed of his E350 was around half that and even the more powerful Mercedes models were limited to 250km/h via electronic governor per an agreement with the German government.

"I know the Bundesautobahn are mostly unlimited, but can you really drive that fast?" he asked Michele.

"I doubt it," Michele admitted. "Top speed has only been reached on test-tracks to my knowledge. Plus you have to put the car into a special mode to go faster than 375, which itself is a pretty ludicrous speed on public roads when you think about it. Not to mention during the day, traffic would be too dense so you'd need to do it late at night and, well, I don't even want to think about doing 400km/h with just a small patch of illuminated road ahead of me. Plus at 400, the tires are only good for 15 minutes and then they delaminate. Course, the 100 liter tank runs dry in about 12..."

"It seems an impractical exercise to me," Hillshire opined.

"So was *Concorde*, if you looked at it rationally," Michele replied. "And like *Concorde*, I don't think we'll ever see anything like this again. VW loses millions on each one when you factor in all the costs. And if it is the only one of her class, then I am not about to miss probably my only chance to drive it."

Hillshire could only shrug. To him, a car was a tool. He'd bought the Mercedes because it was reliable, practical and German.

The route Michele chose for the trip home to Milan was part of the European Route 45 that bisected the continent from Kaaresuvanto, Finland in the north to Gela, Sicily in the south. They would follow Bundesautobahn 9 from Berlin to Munich, Bundesautobahn 8 from Munich to Resenheim and then Bundesautobahn 93 to the Austrian Border. Crossing into Austria at Kufstein, they would drive west on Austrian Autobahn 12 to Innsbruck then south on Autobahn 13 through the Brenner Pass and into Italy. They would then follow Autostrada A22 to Verona and cut west on Autostrada 4 to Milan. The total distance was around 1000km. They planned three hours from Berlin to the Austrian border at an average of 200km/h. The speed limits in Austria and Italy were 130km/h, but they figured they could safely do 150, which would allow them to cover the remaining 450km distance to Milan in another three hours.

They said their goodbyes and Michele and Kara strapped in.

"This must be what the inside of a cow looks and feels like," Kara deadpanned from the passenger seat as she examined what seemed like hectares of the finest-grain leather.

Michele pressed the start button and the engine came to life, though it sounded surprisingly quiet for harnessing such power. He carefully pulled out into traffic and made his way for the Bundesautobahn.

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Michele pulled off Bundesautobahn 9 at the Sophienberg parking area 311km south of Berlin 90 minutes after leaving the city.

"There is a 10km stretch of road between Trockau and Pegnitz with no off-ramps or on-ramps. It also has the lowest traffic density on the A9, but still averages some 40,000 cars a day," Michele noted.

"Are you going to go for it?" Kara asked.

"Alas, even the Autobahn is too rough for a true top-speed run. But I expect you can get her to her normal top end of 375," Michele noted.

"Me?" Kara exclaimed. "I'm not about to drive this thing," she stated. "Besides, it costs a million Euro and I don't have a license. If anything goes wrong...Far better for you to do it."

"I don't think I have the skills...or the courage, if I'm honest. As effortless as 300km/h is in this thing, even that is almost too fast for my comfort. You, on the other hand, seem to thrive at warp speed. I'm not going to make you do something you don't want to. But do you want to?"

"Yes I do," she admitted. "But this is just crazy. Just being in the passenger seat should be enough for any sane person."

"I trust you," Michele replied. "Your reflexes are instantaneous and your driving skills are solid. You've driven an F1 car around a track. You lapped Fiorano in the F430 at speeds that made my heart stop, yet you were in total control the entire time."

"This will be faster than both. By some 100km/h more. And the A9 isn't a race track," she noted. They looked at each other for a moment, and Michele shrugged in a "you only live once" manner.

"If I die," Kara said.

"I promise to come, too," Michele replied.

They exited the car and Kara settled into the driver's seat, adjusting it and the steering until they were in the perfect position. The pedals were offset well to the right so she tried them until she felt sure she could go from the throttle to the brake in literally an instant.

Michele strapped into the passenger seat and this time it was Kara who crossed herself before she started the car and pulled out onto the A9. While the Bundesautobahn had some formal speed limits, mostly near populated areas or where traffic was chronically congested, on the "unlimited" stretches the recommended speed was 130km/h. Kara stayed at this speed in the far right lane to ensure that her mirrors and everything were properly set and to get a feel for how the car handled.

"You're right, driving this car is effortless," she noted. "I could drive it with one hand at even this speed."

"This car is something completely different," Michele agreed. "Truly infinite power that just about anyone can control."

A Porsche 911 Turbo flashed by at over 200km/h, but the driver promptly stood on his brakes when he realized what he'd just passed.

The 911 slowed alongside and the driver snapped a few pictures of her and the car on his cellular phone camera.

The road straightened out for what looked like five or more kilometers in the distance. Kara looked behind her and saw nothing approaching in either the left or middle lane and the left lane ahead looked clear for as far as she could see.

"I'm going for it," she said. She moved the transmission lever from "D" to "S" and the car immediately downshifted from seventh to second, the revs instantly climbing from 1500 to 5000. She could almost feel the car hunker down, waiting for her to stab the accelerator, which she promptly did, pushing it to the floor with her boot.

The effect was like being fired from a canon.

The 1250 N-m of torque kicked in and both were pressed back into their seats by almost one and a half times the force of gravity. The needle on the dial to the left that supposedly showed how much horsepower was being made spun to 1000 in time with the tachometer's spin to 6000 rpm.

The 911 disappeared behind them and in seconds they were passing 160km/h as third gear engaged. Fourth gear and 240 came five seconds after that and another ten had her passing 320 in fifth gear - in fifteen seconds she'd tripled her speed and the car didn't seem to be breaking a sweat doing it. The seven-speed Direct-Shift Gearbox cracked off the changes in less than 150 milliseconds with a smoothness that made the gearbox in the F430 feel as if a sledgehammer had been hitting the car.

As the car barreled past 200km/h it engaged "handling mode", lowering to about 89mm of the ground. The rear spoiler also deployed to generate downforce to anchor the back wheels to the road.

Traffic ahead stayed welded in the far right lane, as if afraid of the snarling beast roaring down on them. The tire noise was titanic and the engine sounded like it was sucking in, compressing, igniting and then expelling the entire planetary atmosphere every revolution of the crank. Michele risked a look at Kara's face and he could almost see the physics calculations going on behind her eyes. Those eyes flicked between the road - rushing past in what seemed like a blur - and the speedometer as the car kept accelerating, the thousand horsepower shoving aside the air like a bulldozer did a mound of dirt. The car was

using every bit of the engine's performance to claw its way past 350...then 360...370...

"375!" she shouted in triumph some two kilometers after she started and she held it at that speed for a full 30 seconds before she backed off the throttle. Immediately the rear spoiler popped open as a speed brake, the increase in drag alone slowed the car with the full braking force of a small car and even a light press on the brake pedal resulted in immediate and fierce deceleration. Within what seemed like seconds they were back below 300km/h.

"Oh God, do that again, please," Michele said.

"Hell yeah," Kara agreed. She saw the 911 come storming up beside her on the right. As he pulled alongside, Michele tossed him a wave and Kara hammered the throttle again. The Bugatti was using less than half its available power to hold their current speed so it launched forward, leaving the 911 behind as if it had dropped anchor. Kara found the sense of effortless speed intoxicating, but one run at 375km/h was enough for her and she kept the speed to around 325 for the rest of the run to the Raststätte service area, where she pulled off and parked.

"I want one!" she and Michele shouted simultaneously and both burst out laughing. They were a bit weak in the knees as they exited the car and people at the station were drawn towards it like moths to a flame.

"I've driven the most powerful and fastest production cars on the planet and none of them were anything like this," Michele said, resting his hand on the roof.

"That was almost as powerful as the Jordan F1 car in terms of acceleration and braking," Kara added. "At 300 it was as stable as your apartment block in Milan. There was a little bit of lightness in the front end as I pushed through 330, but even at 375 it felt more stable than the F430 does at 300. It's brilliant. Totally brilliant."

She handed the key to Michele and went inside to use the restroom while he topped off the tank, which had been drained by well over a quarter from the short top speed run they had done.

Two young men who'd just stepped out of a Volkswagen Golf GTI R32 came up to Michele.



"Dude...Well done! That's a sweet ride and she's a sweet girlfriend," the one on the left said. They both saluted him and headed inside.

"That guy is going to get so laid tonight," he said to his friend, causing a strangled sound to come from Michele.

A few moments later Kara came out, her face beet-red in embarrassment and consternation.

"What is it?" Michele asked, but she shook her head and got in the passenger side without comment.

Michele had a sudden sense of foreboding. He leaned his head in through the open driver's side window.

"Please tell me you didn't kill them."

"I was too embarrassed to do anything. I don't think what I overheard them say is even anatomically possible," she noted.

Michele completed the refueling and got in.

"Are all boys as stupid as those two?" Kara asked.

"I'm afraid so," Michele answered.

"It's a wonder the species still procreates," Kara stated.

"Nature always finds a way," Michele noted as he started the car and pulled back onto the Bundesautobahn.

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They arrived in Milan just after sunset around 19:00 and wound their way through the city center to Michele's apartment, located in a five story building on the Via Montevideo in Zona 1 in the historic center of the city. The building faced the Parco Solari and downtown Milan. While the outside remained unchanged, the interior of the building had been gutted and renovated at the turn of the millennium into an ultra-modern style. The rooms were narrow and deep and rose all four levels of the building.

Michele pulled up to a gated garage and held an ID card up against a reader. The gate rolled up and he drove into a garage area and into his assigned parking spot. A short hall led from the garage into the main

lobby where the receptionist greeted them. They continued along the back wall and rounded the corner down a hallway that led to the back of the building. Along the back ran a second hallway with four doors, one for each of the four loft apartments. Michele's was at the far end and he used the same card to open the electronic lock. They stepped into a small foyer that had a closet to the left of the door and climbed a flight of stairs to the ground floor.

The ground floor contained the living and dining rooms along with a gourmet kitchen and a half-bathroom. In the front of the living room was a small balcony and the dining room opened onto a large common terraced area in the back that was separated by diagonal lines of tall, ornamental trees. A staircase along the wall led to the second mezzanine, which overlooked the living room area. This was furnished as a study with bookshelves on the walls and comfortable leather chairs. Another staircase above the first led to the third floor, which held a bedroom with on-suite full bathroom in back and a small office in front with large windows. A third staircase led to the master suite on the top floor, which opened out onto a small private terrace in front with views of the Parco and Milan.

"I'm going to take a shower," Kara noted as she carried her bag up to her room on the third floor.

Michele pulled out his cell phone and called the owner of the Veyron, who also lived in Milan, though in a large villa outside of the city on Lago Idroscalo. He and his wife would be having dinner at Ristorante Al Sorriso across the city from Michele's apartment, so he asked if Michele and Kara would like to bring it over to the restaurant and have dinner with them and then the chauffer could bring them back to the apartment.

When she exited the shower, Michele asked Kara about the offer. Neither had eaten since Berlin, but both were pretty tired from the drive and decided that Michele would take the car back and then politely decline the offer. Meanwhile, Kara would order dinner from a local trattoria and he could pick it up on the way back for them to enjoy at home.

Michele drove the Veyron across town and to the restaurant. The valet flagged him down and directed him to a double space across the street in front of the train tracks. As he exited, the owner came out.

"No Kara?" he asked.

"She's very tired and expresses her regrets," Michele noted. "I also can't stay for dinner."

His friend nodded his head in understanding. "So how was it?" he asked.

"Easily the greatest car I have ever driven," Michele said. "Over a thousand kilometers in some six hours and Kara and I were comfortable the entire trip. It makes my Enzo feel like a cement truck. Even past 300km/h it is as planted as the Basilica of Sant'Ambrogio."

"What did Kara think about driving it?" He knew her skills as a driver and a pilot and he valued her opinions.

"She hit 375km/h over a few kilometers on the Autobahn and said it was a bit skittish at that speed, but still very drivable. Go easy on the wine this evening because you're going to want to stretch her legs out and a kilometer on the A51 on the way home isn't going to cut it."

"You going to get one?"

"God knows I'm tempted, but a million Euro. That's 10% of my liquid assets," Michele noted.

"You could get that for your Enzo on the market," his friend noted with a smile. "Speaking of which, have you told Kara you actually own one yet?"

"No," Michele replied. "Once she gets her license I'll tell her about. And I must thank you again for letting us bring your new toy to you."

"Beats a middle seat on Lufthansa, I'm sure," his friend said.

Michele thanked his friend again, told him to pass on his regards to his wife, and headed for the Lambrate FS Metro station where he caught the S2 line to Sant'Agostino station near Parco Solari. He went to the local trattoria and picked up the order Kara had placed and brought it back, which they enjoyed on the terrace of his master suite as they watched the city lights below and the stars above.

"A good day, overall?" Michele asked.

"Best. Day. Ever." Kara replied.

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"Yes, Generale. I understand, Generale. Thank you, Generale," Colonnello Basile said in succession before hanging up the phone.

"Sir?" his aide asked.

"We're off the case. The Generale has been ordered by the Minister himself to, and I quote, 'stop putting his nose into areas of business that do not concern him and focus on his job'."

"So that's it, sir?"

"That is indeed it. I think we've wasted enough of our time on this goose-chase. Let whoever it is bask in their glory. God knows it's fleeting enough, eh?" he added with a chuckle.

"With respect, sir, you're taking this better than I expected."

"It hasn't been the best day ever, but I have certainly had worse," Colonnello Basile noted. "And I can at least take some comfort in that."

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**The End**