

*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.*

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## **"Quid Pro Quo"**

A Gunslinger Girl Original Story by Kiskaloo

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Even in early October the Friday weather in the Italian port city of Genoa was mild and pleasant. Precipitation was highest during this month, but the skies were clear and blue and a pleasant sun warmed the air into the low 20's.

The marina Porto Antico was located in the old harbor of Genoa, with 260 berths for vessels up to 60 meters in length. In one of these berths a 47m ketch slowly rode the waves as a swarm of people completed the job of preparing her for a cruise along the Italian and French Riviera.

Launched in 2002 by the Italian yacht-building firm of Perini Navi SpA, the S/Y *Azzura* was a modern motorized sailing yacht designed to travel the world's oceans from pole to pole. The vessel presented a very high level of luxury with all the latest electronic conveniences. She could sleep eight guests in four bedrooms paneled in the finest wood and Italian marble while a crew of eight ensured that those guests never wanted for anything. She spent the summers in the Mediterranean and Michele entered into a charter agreement from Genoa to Valencia in Spain for himself and some very special guests.

Michele, dressed in a striped polo and dark blue khakis with deck shoes, stood towards the bow as a black Mercedes S Class with deeply-tinted windows pulled up before the ship. An elderly man in a bespoke suit and a much younger woman in a designer sundress emerged from the back and walked across a gangplank to board, followed by the chauffeur with two large suitcases.

"Pagani, good to see you again, boy. How's your old man?"

"He and mother are fine, Senator. Thank you," Michele replied.

"No need for titles with me, Michele. I've known you since you were in *scuola primaria*," Senator Corelli said with a laugh. He turned to the voluptuous blond hanging on his arm.

"Michele here is quite a catch, Fiorina. He made a mint in the American stock market so when you grow tired of me, you might want to look him up," Corelli said with a chuckle. In response, Fiorina flashed Michele a dazzling grin from perfect teeth.

"He's already taken, Senator," Kara said as she came up beside Michele, the smile on her face and the warmth of her tone not hiding the hint of steel in her words, however. She wore a very short pair of white cotton shorts and a red tank-top that revealed her bare midriff. As she hated sandals, Kara instead wore tennis socks and red hiking shoes.

"Kara, this is Senator Arturo Corelli. The Senator represents Milan and has been a friend of my father's since University," Michele stated. Kara replied with a bow.

A BMW 745Li and a Maserati Quattroporte Executive GT arrived together and Senator Mauro Gozzi and Deputy Renato Musto stepped out of each, respectively. Both also had young and attractive women on their arms.

"Welcome aboard Senator Gozzi; Deputy Musto," Michele greeted. "If you would all follow Linda here, she will escort you to the salon."

"That's everyone," he told the First Mate, who nodded and with one of the deckhands started to pull in the gangplank and prepare to make way as Michele and Kara made their way to the salon.

"This is a fantastic boat you have, Michele," Senator Corelli noted when they entered.

"Thank you. I'll pass your compliments on to the owner," Michele replied. "I expect you all would like to change into more appropriate attire now that we are underway. Hilary here will show you to your quarters. At your convenience, feel free to join me in the aft cockpit for appetizers and drinks."

After the three couples had left, Michele and Kara headed for the Fly Bridge.

"We can depart at your convenience, Captain," Michele noted.

"Aye, Mister Pagani," the Ship's Master replied. He lifted a walkie-talkie and ordered the First Mate and deckhands to their stations.

Towards the back of the Fly Bridge, Ilaria reclined in one of the yellow fabric couches, soaking in the sun in pair of white flat sandals with a deep-blue sleeveless sun dress. On another couch, Claes was reading a book, dressed in t-shirt and denim miniskirt with sneakers.

"Okay, ladies. I don't expect any trouble, so go ahead and relax and keep your weapons in your staterooms," Michele said.

"That's fine by me," Ilaria replied. "Babysitting a couple of politicians on a yacht is my idea of an assignment."

She looked to Kara. "I owe you one, roommate," she added with a smile.

The ship moved out of Genoa harbor into the Ligurian Sea. The strong breeze filled the main and mizzen sails and the boat glided across the waves, kicking up a white froth that stood out against the deep blue water.

Michele and Kara made their way back to the aft cockpit where *tartinas* and *antipastos* were being prepared under the supervision of the head chef, an American who had three Michelin stars to her name from stints at two restaurants prior to moving to the yachting industry. Hilary brought out a sterling silver champagne bucket with a chilled bottle of Krug Clos du Mesnil and a collection of Riedel Sommeliers Vintage Champagne stemware and everyone toasted each other's health and the health of the Italian Republic.

The three men seated along the fantail couch were in a combined way the "father" of not only the Social Welfare Agency, but Public Safety, Special Operations and the cyborg assassin program. Though each of them worked independently, their combined actions had given birth to girls like Kara, Ilaria and Claes. The cruise was a thank you to the three men for their support of a bill that allowed a technology transfer with the United States to bring some advanced nanotechnology the SWA Medical Staff wanted.

While he currently lived in and represented Rome, Senator Gozzi had been born and raised in the region of Basilicata and as a boy and young man witnessed first hand the predations of the various organized crime groups that operated in the southern regions of Italy.

This made him a staunch supporter of the efforts by the Italian government to bring them into line as well as try and prevent the creation of new organized crime groups in Northern and Central Italy driven by immigration from Eastern Europe and other areas.

A life long friend of the Prime Minister, he'd offered enthusiastic support for the PM's idea of a new counter-intelligence and counter-terrorism group that would operate outside the Byzantine bureaucracies of the Ministries of Defense and Interior. He'd actually been the one to recommend that the PM use the Social Welfare Agency as a cover for this group since it was a pet project of the PM and his Office administered it directly, as opposed to the usual process of parking it under one of the various Ministries. While the private side of the SWA remained a closely guarded secret, Senator Gozzi still offered significant support to them, especially Section 2. Section 2 showed their appreciation for that support by carrying out the hit against Deputy Mascarl to push the Conralto Act through.

Deputy Musto also was a southerner, representing the Province of Salerno in southern Campania. The Camorra had ingrained themselves deeply into the region over the decades and held strong sway over much of the local, provincial and even regional government. Musto entered politics at a young age, starting on the Salerno town council followed by the provincial council. He'd rebuffed all attempts by the Camorra to bring him into their sphere of influence, both covert and overt. His constituents loved him and their vocal support thwarted attempts by Camorra to influence the electorate against him and no doubt helped keep Musto alive in office. When he ran for the Regional Council of Campania, Camorra fought hard to defeat him, but his anti-Camorra stance had brought him to the attention of a young staffer of a member of the Chamber of Deputies from Apulia. This staffer, who would become the current Prime Minister, succeeded in convincing his boss to get his party to offer support for Musto, who successfully won a seat on the Council.

Musto never forgot the PM's favor and eventually rose to the Vice Presidency of the Regional Council. When the PM himself ran to succeed his retiring boss in the next general election, he convinced Musto to also run for the Chamber of Deputies and the two supported each other, both being elected to office. They formed a strong friendship, sponsoring legislation to help try and break the power of the organized crime families. In the early 1990's, the rise of the Internet drew Musto's colleague to leave office and create a telecommunications company what would become an empire

controlling over two-thirds of Italian media. Flush with his success, he re-entered politics towards the end of the decade, his party winning a commanding majority in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate of the Republic. Musto threw his support behind his old friend and received the position of Minister of Labour, Health and Social Affairs where he worked to advance the PM's goals to improve Italian medical technology to the forefront of the world as well as helping bring about the creation of the cyborgs of Section 2.

As for Senator Corelli, his wife of twenty-nine years passed away in the mid-1990s from cancer and when the new Prime Minister created the Social Welfare Agency to advance Italian medical technology to the forefront of the world, he found ready and strong support with the Senator. Though originally only familiar with the public face, he'd been briefed on the private side shortly after Michele joined Public Safety.

Since becoming a widower, Corelli could often be seen with some young thing on his arm and Fiorina had been with him for about six months. The attractive and buxom twenty-somethings sitting next to the other two men were not their wives, either.

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The ship slowly cruised the Sea of Liguria and the staff lit candles in hurricane lamps and placed them on the Fly Bridge where everyone had gathered to watch the sun set as they quaffed cocktails. Ilaria and Kara relaxed in the deck Jacuzzi with Fiorina while the other two companions sat with Gozzi and Musto on the L-shaped couch. Across from them Corelli and Michele sat on a smaller couch. Claes had moved down to the front of the bow, sitting with her chin resting on her knees, her arms wrapped around her lower legs as she watched the waves.

"A 1981 Château Cheval Blanc," Senator Gozzi noted as he examined the label of a bottle of Bordeaux. "You have a sense of humor, I see," he added. The manager of Château Cheval Blanc turned his dogs on a wine critic who had rated his 1981 as sub-par, though afterward he tasted it again and found it to be up to the usual high standards.

"So when did you hook up with Kara?" Gozzi's companion, Clara, asked Michele.

"We started seeing each other regularly in March," Michele replied. The three politicians knew Kara, Ilaria and Claes were all cyborg operatives, but a cover was necessary for their companions as well as

the crew. Under that cover, Kara was Michele's 20-year old girlfriend and Ilaria was her roommate at the University of Milan. Claes was Ilaria's younger sister, aboard because their parents were away for the week.

"She's quite beautiful and exotic," Musto's companion, Rachele, added.

"Thank you," Michele replied, trying to appear natural.

"She's a bit young," Corelli noted, though his eyes twinkled in jest.

"She's at least half his age, which is something you cannot say with Fiorina," Gozzi noted with a smile.

"Nor you with Clara," Corelli retorted, though he did so with a hearty laugh.

Fiorina climbed out of the Jacuzzi and used the deck shower to wash herself off. She then towed herself dry and threw a Fendi zebra-stripe caftan over her bikini before joining Corelli on the couch.

Hilary appeared on the Fly Bridge and walked up to Michele.

"Padrone? Dinner is ready," she reported.

"Thank you, Hilary," Michele said. Kara and Ilaria both left the Jacuzzi and showered, Kara donning a coral reef patterned caftan while Ilaria tied a lagoon leaf print pareo around her waist. Michele called for Claes to come join them and she acknowledged with a wave.

Due to the pleasant weather and sights, Michele chose for dinner to be served *al fresco* in the aft cockpit on the main deck where a large table had been set. The multi-course dinner menu reflected the excellent local seafood and they washed down the meal with Pol Roger Cuvée Sir Winston Churchill champagne and a 1982 Château Lafite Rothschild Bordeaux.

After dinner everyone returned to the Fly Bridge to watch the stars while they enjoyed caffè and digestivos. Kara and Ilaria decided to take a swim in the warm water and were joined by Fiorina, Clara and Rachele. Gozzi and Musto lit cigars to go with their *grappa* while Michele sipped on *nocino*.

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Around 20:00 Michele came up onto the Fly Bridge, two blankets in his arms.

"Lift up your legs," Michele ordered Claes, who lay stretched out along one side of the L-shaped couch, staring at the skies above her. She did so and Michele laid one of the blankets on top of her, tucking it in under her legs.

"Thank you," she said as Michele laid down on the other couch, his head near hers, and placed the second blanket over himself.

"It's so beautiful and quiet. I'd like to spend the night out here," Claes added.

"Better not. I don't want you to catch a cold," Michele replied.

"I'm not sure we can," Claes noted.

"Well then I don't want you to rust in the sea air."

Despite her efforts, a chuckle escaped Claes' lips.

"Victory is mine," Michele crowed, mimicking the line spoken by a baby on an old American animated television series he and Kara discovered on DVD.

"Where is everyone?" Claes asked, forcing her voice serious again.

"They're watching Serie A football on the plasma in the salon," Michele replied.

"Thank you for bringing me," Claes added.

"The assignment is a cakewalk and I know you enjoy the sea," Michele replied. He had to admit the view of the constellations away from the city lights was amazing – he could even see the hazy band of the galactic center stretch across the sky.

"I still believe you're too kind for this job," she noted. "Even though she brought you to the SWA, Kara is fortunate to have you for her handler."

"Kara may have brought me to Special Operations, Section 2, but I'm an SWA plank holder," Michele replied.

"Plank holder?"

"It's an old naval term, dating back when to when warships were made from wood. The first crew assigned to the vessel upon her commissioning would be given wooden planks from the construction materials to signify their status. Giulio Draghi recruited me into Public Safety within weeks of the department's creation. I actually have more time in grade than the Croce brothers. When he went to lead Special Operations, Section 1 he asked me to come with him, but I'd just settled into my role and didn't really relish a combat tasking, having just recently left combat duty with the Aeronautica Militare. I did have a hand in the creation of the cyborg program as well as Angelica's augmentation, which gave Director Lorenzo the leverage he needed to bring me into Section 2 as a condition for allowing Kara to undergo the surgeries."

They watched the stars until they heard the chatter from the salon fade away and then Michele forced Claes to get up and head inside with him to go to bed.

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The sun rose a bit after 7:00 and Claes was the first to awake, Ilaria snoring softly in the other bunk. She dressed and made her way to the Fly Bridge to read. Michele was up next and took a shower before heading up on deck where he was joined a few moments later by Arturo Corelli.

"I see your girl is still sleeping as well?" the Senator noted as he took a seat at one of the side tables in the aft cockpit.

"This is kind of a vacation for her, so I decided to let her sleep in," Michele replied.

Hilary appeared and asked if both men were ready for breakfast now and fifteen minutes later she appeared with two plates of "Land and Sea Benedict" - poached eggs served on filet mignon and topped with lobster medallions and fresh Hollandaise.

"Ah nothing like a nice light breakfast," Corelli noted with a smile. "Fortunately, when you reach my age, you tend to not worry so much about your cholesterol," he added as he dived into his meal.

"So how are you and Kara getting along?" Corelli asked Michele.



"Quite good," Michele replied. "She's adapted very well to the surgeries and the conditioning. We have a number of things in common which certainly helps. Her emotions can be a bit erratic at times, but she's a teenager so I suppose I have to expect that."

"That is why my girlfriends are at least in their late 20's," Corelli replied with a chuckle.

"You're really incorrigible, Senator."

"I'll take that as a complement, Michele."

As if knowing they were talking about her, Kara appeared moments later. She ordered a vanilla bean brioche French toast with raspberry sauce and powdered sugar.

Over the next two hours, everyone else arose and had breakfast. During the night the ship had made for the coast, the Region of Liguria being known as "the Italian Riviera". They were now outside Camogli, a famous fishing village and tourist resort known for the rows of pastel-colored homes that lined the harbor and climbed into the hills.

Fiorina, Clara and Rachel all wanted to go ashore to shop, something their male companions were not enthused about, themselves. Therefore, Kara and Ilaria were sent along to chaperone / guard them and all five and a steward piled into the 5m dinghy and motored off. The politicians decided to get in some deep sea fishing and took the 4m dinghy into port to transfer to a fishing boat. This left Michele and Claes alone on the boat, so they took one of the sailing dinghies out on the water so Claes could gain more experience and practice.

Everyone returned to the ship for dinner and drinks and the vessel continued to slowly make it's way westward along the Riviera di Ponente for the next two days, visiting a number of internationally-known villages and towns.

On the afternoon of the third day they docked in Monaco where they were met by Minister Petris and Directors Lorenzo and Draghi. While the ladies went shopping, the three directors and three politicians had lunch and discussed funding and operations. When their companions returned from shopping, all nine boarded limousines which took them to the Monaco Heliport at Fontvieille where they boarded a Eurocopter AS365 N Dauphin from Heli Air Monaco that flew them to Nice Côte

d'Azur Airport where they boarded an Aeronautica Militare Dassault Falcon 50 to Rome-Ciampino.

Michele and the girls stayed aboard and continued to Valencia, Spain, arriving on Friday evening. They spent the weekend in the city and then flew home to Rome Sunday afternoon.

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**The End**