

**SOUTH TOWER  
MARRIOTT MARQUIS HOTEL AND MARINA  
SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA  
LATE FALL**

Michele Pagani watched an amphibious assault ship sail past his hotel room balcony on her way to her mooring at Naval Base San Diego in the south. Across San Diego Bay two of her larger *Nimitz* class aircraft carriers stood proud at their piers on Naval Air Station North Island. A soft breeze blew in off the Pacific Ocean, working with the warm temperatures to banish the haze off towards the horizon.

The clatter of his iPhone vibrating on the glass top of the table next to him broke him out of his thoughts. He swiped the glass and saw the iMessage informing him his escort and ride had arrived at the hotel. Michele texted his acknowledgement and left his suite to ride the elevator down to the tower lobby and walked to the main lobby that connected both towers. It took him only a few seconds to identify his escort thanks to the khaki Navy Service Uniform he was wearing.

"General Pagani? I'm Lieutenant Henderson. I'll be escorting you to NMCSO, sir."

"Excellent. Lead the way, Lieutenant," Michele replied. He followed the naval officer outside and settled into the right seat of a black Ford Taurus with government plates. They exited the hotel onto 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue and drove north before turning onto C Street, which they then drove east before heading north into the urban forest of Balboa Park and Naval Medical Center San Diego.

In the mid-2000s the United States became aware of the Social Welfare Agency, the *fratelli* and the cyborg program. Some speculated it was one of the many SIGINT programs run by the NSA while others thought that the various technology trades made for the benefit of the SWA had laid a trail. Whatever the reason, groups within the US quickly saw the value of having a cyborg program of their own and this program - christened The Rehabilitation Branch - was modeled in part on Section 2 of the Social Welfare Agency and the two agencies started to formally share information and technology on cybernetic enhancement of pre-teen and teenage girls.

Lieutenant Henderson turned onto the access road and flashed his staff credentials at the security gate and the guard on duty verified that Michele was on the Official Visitors List for the day. Once cleared, they proceeded to the staff parking area across from Building 2. Once inside, Henderson signed Michele in at the Reception Area and both men walked through the Adolescent Clinic to a door identified only by a plaque with a four-digit number just above a security card reader.

A white corridor extended beyond, with more doors identified only by numbers with a security reader beneath them. Michele followed Lieutenant Henderson two-thirds of the way down and stopped at one of the doors. He ran his card through the reader, waited for the light to change from red to green and hear the click of the lock disengaging, and then opened the door, the thickness of which did not go unnoticed by Michele.

Americans liked things large and that extended to their hospital rooms. The large windows and lack of furniture did lend the room in general an airy feel, which made the equipment clustered around the single bed seem like a physical barrier separating the patient from the rest of the facility.

Hovering over that equipment stood one Doctor Edward Kostas, director of this particular facility of the Rehabilitation Branch of the US Department of Homeland Security. His full beard and glasses gave him a professorial look and his deep tan implied he was able to spend a fair bit of his time out of the office, something the medical technicians back in Rome seldom seemed to have time for.

This was Michele's first time meeting the doctor in person, his previous interactions performed over videoconference during the selection and configuration process for the cyborg he would shortly be taking custody of.

"Welcome to San Diego, General," Kostas greeted.

"Michele, please," the Italian replied, taking the physician's extended hand in his own.

"Here she is," Kostas stated, indicating for Michele to step forward. He did so and looked down on the sleeping form of a fifteen-year old Japanese girl. Unlike his first cyborg, the girl in the bed was pure Japanese in ethnicity and parentage, though she'd been born in

Torrance, California to parents who themselves were natural born American citizens, making her what was known as a *sansei*, or third-generation American of Japanese descent.

"What languages does she speak?" Michele asked and Kostas looked a bit uncomfortable.

"Since we limit ourselves to American citizens, they all speak English so unless there is a specific reason to do so, we generally do not imprint them with any other languages during the conversion process. Some cyborgs speak other languages from their former lives and that carries forward, but that's not the case with Kumari. So if you were hoping for Italian or Japanese language skills, that's probably going to be limited to food items and slang."

"Fair enough," Michele said. His English and Spanish were both excellent so there would be no issues with communication with his cyborg or for the mission ahead and if he felt she would benefit from another language, there were plenty of quick-learning options.

"If you're ready, we can activate her," Kostas indicated and Michele nodded his head.

The doctor flicked some switches and turned some knobs on the machines next to him and within moments, Kumari snapped awake and popped up like a monster in a teen horror movie, an image helped a bit by her long, dark hair that partly hung over her bangs and down her back. Michele noted that, unlike the Italians, the Americans appeared to cover their cyborgs in a hospital gown.

"Identify yourself," Kostas ordered.

"Kumari Shiratori. I am unit series 053; block 8; age set 15; attempt 1. I am an agent with the Rehabilitation Branch, Department of Homeland Security, on temporary duty assignment to Brigadier General Michele Pagani of the Italian Air Force."

She spoke with a soft, gentle voice that reminded Michele a bit of Claes.

"Do you recognize General Pagani?"

Kumari nodded, raising an arm and pointing it at Michele.

"Excellent. We're going to let you get dressed and then we'll be back. You'll find your clothes in the closet," Kostas noted, indicating a sliding door in one of the walls.

The two men excused themselves and stepped into an adjoining room, Kostas dimming the one-way mirror to allow Kumari her privacy. He turned to Michele and waited for his opinion.

"She's a stunner," Michele noted.

"We don't choose our candidates on the basis of their looks, but I'd be lying if attractiveness didn't play any role in the decision or the conversion. Speaking of which, our conversion and conditioning process is based on those originally developed at the SWA, though we're a bit less stringent with the latter."

Michele nodded his understanding. "Training and skills?"

"As with the SWA, we load a general compendium of weapons information along with basic firearms knowledge and operational proficiency. Of course, she'll need formal training with specific weapons and as with anyone, the more she practices the better her proficiency. At your request we also gave her a basic understanding of *budō* and *bujitsu*, however you will need to train her in the specific martial arts you wish her to know."

"Seems to be all pretty standard," Michele noted.

"I imagine this is all routine for you, having already worked with cyborgs for years and served as handler to two of your own," Kostas observed.

Before Michele could reply, the speaker overhead crackled into life.

"I'm ready, Doctor Kostas," Kumari reported.

"We'll be right in," Kostas answered over the intercom and he turned off the dimming function to reveal Kumari in a white sleeveless dress with sailor collars and twin rows of three decorative buttons embossed with white anchors down the front, black socks that ended just below the knees and black patent leather t-strap Mary Jane pumps.

"You look lovely, Miss Shiratori," Kostas noted when he entered the room and Michele nodded.

"We need to run some final tests to ensure everything is working properly, then we'll release you into General Pagani's custody," the doctor added and Kumari nodded.

Michele didn't know if it was coincidence or if someone had been listening, but there was a knock on the door and a Filipino male in a junior enlisted Navy Service Dress uniform with the rank insignia of a Petty Officer First Class on his collars entered.

"General, PS1 Panlasigui here will walk you through her documentation so if you would follow him, please," Kostas requested.

"This way, General," Panlasigui requested and they went down the hall and into a small office dominated by rows of metal filing cabinets that allowed just enough space for a desk and two chairs. Michele took the chair across from Panlasigui who removed a manila folder with a thick sheaf of papers inside.

"Normally, we have the handler adopt the cyborg for legal reasons," Panlasigui explained. "Since this is only a temporary assignment, your cover will be as Kumari's general legal guardian with a term of six months. This will give you responsibility for her personal well-being and provide you the ability to take her across State lines and outside of the country as necessary. This is an identification card issued by the State of California. In general she won't need to use it, but be sure she has it on her at all times and also be sure to keep this copy of the court order with you at all times because as a foreign national you can expect questions from authority figures as to why she is with you. Her passport number has been flagged as a VIP so if you have any issues when travelling internationally, contact Dominica Reyes and she can engage with State to clear it up. If you intend to travel to a country that requires a Visa for US Citizens, she'll see that it is issued expeditiously. Do you have any questions?"

"I do not," Michele replied.

Panlasigui placed the folder and documents inside a manila envelope and handed it to Michele. They then returned to Kumari's hospital room.

"She's ready to go, Michele. Here is my card with my direct and personal lines. I am available 24-7 should you have any issues or questions," Kostas stated.

"Thank you, Doctor."

"PS1 Panlasigui, Lieutenant Henderson is waiting in the lobby to take them back to their hotel. Please escort the General and Miss Shiratori there."

"Yes, Doctor."

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"Are you hungry?" Michele asked once Lieutenant Henderson dropped them off at the hotel.

Kumari nodded her head.

"What would you like for lunch?"

"Mápó dòufu."

Having never heard of it, Michele looked it up on his smartphone, surprised to find it was a Sichuan dish of tofu in a spicy chili- and bean-based sauce, as he considered himself well versed in Sichuan cuisine. Another search identified that the restaurants that served it were all clustered north of the city and he asked the valet to have his car brought up. He'd chosen a Ferrari 458 Italia Spyder due to the fine weather and once on I-805, rocketed north in the light traffic to the restaurant.

When asked how spicy she wished her mápó dòufu, Kumari had held up five fingers so Michele expected serious heat when Kumari held up her spoon for him to try a bite. Yet even though his personal motto when it came to spicing of "if I'm not crying, the chef is not trying" did not prepare him for the spice level on this dish, which he expected swallowing molten lead might feel like. Kumari, however, devoured the dish, the closest thing he'd seen to an expression of happiness on her face. As they headed for the car after the meal, Michele picked up on a sense of distress from Kumari.

"Are you feeling alright?" he asked.

Kumari nodded, but Michele still sensed she wasn't comfortable with something. That feeling grew as they drove back to the hotel, and he became concerned that perhaps the food had not agreed with her, yet when they pulled up onto the hotel drive and handed the car over to

the valet, she looked relieved. She'd looked much the same during the drive to the restaurant, but had perked up once they were inside.

As Michele passed the king bed, Michele wondered if that might prove an issue, however Kumari showed him it would not be by removing her shoes and lying down, almost instantly falling asleep.

"Good idea," he noted. Over the previous three days he'd flown close to 30,000 kilometers and the crossing of nineteen time zones had given him terrible jet lag and his mind felt as foggy as San Francisco International.

His week had begun at his apartment in Brisbane, boarding an Emirates airline Airbus A380-800 to Dubai, where he connected to another Emirates A380 to Milan. From Milan he had driven to Rome to meet with the Prime Minister at the Palazzo Chigi. It had been years since Michele Pagani had been required to drive through the warren of streets that crisscrossed the Eternal City and the experience on the drive in had been as stressful as he'd remembered.

Now in this third term as President of the Council of Ministers of Italy, the years had not been kind to his schoolyard chum though only those who'd known him for as long as Michele had could detect the subtle cracks in the persona Renato presented to the country and world at large. The Italian government's battle against the separatists of Padania and the Five Republics faction, now tagged by the media as "The Years of Blue", continued to rage. However, new threats were raising their head and the clandestine side of the Social Welfare Agency had been tasked to take them on, as well.

One of those threats was the drug trade, especially cocaine. The 'Ndrangheta, or "Calabrese Mafia" after their stronghold in the Calabria Region, had become the most powerful – and one of the most violent – criminal organizations not just in Italy, but the world at large, over the past few decades and by some reports their illicit activities accounted for a measureable, if small, percentage of Italy's Gross Domestic Product. A fair amount of the cocaine distributed throughout the European Union entered via the Calabrian port of Gioia Tauro and they were also deeply involved with the producers in Columbia and the distribution cartels in Mexico.

Within the past year, reports started to reach the US government that those Mexican Cartels, perhaps as a pre-emptive measure, were seeking to obtain their own cybernetic technology, ironically in part

through corrupted contacts within the Rehabilitation Branch and medical firms working on developing and producing cybernetic parts for the RB.

This brought the governments of the US and Italy together to enter into an agreement to cooperate on a mission in Mexico to disrupt the cartels efforts to secure cyborg technology. The Rehabilitation Branch found itself temporarily in the situation where it had more cyborgs than handlers and a former SWA operative now working as the head of the RB branch office in Chicago, Marcus Moretti, suggested that feelers be extended to the SWA to see if they could provide someone to temporarily serve as a handler until a permanent assignment could be found.

As he had done almost a decade prior, Prime Minister Renato Pisano went to his school-hood chum Michele Pagani and asked him to become a temporary handler to Kumari Shiratori. And because he was one of Pisano's oldest and closest friends, Michele had agreed.

After agreeing, Michele drove back to Milan, dropped off his car, and boarded his third Emirates A380 to New York's John F. Kennedy International. From New York, he settled into the back of a Mercedes S Class that drove him to Washington D.C. where he met with James West, the Rehabilitation Branch Chief of Staff, and Dominica Reyes, his right-hand woman and the person who he'd been communicating with in regards to his assignment and Kumari.

As the man who determined who was hired and who was fired, James had thoroughly vetted Michele's resume and bona fides. His conclusion was that Michele had the skills and the experience to make an excellent handler, but he was not comfortable with the fact that his loyalties lay with Italy and his presence here was because it was felt by those higher up The Chain that closer cooperation between the Rehabilitation Branch and the Italian Social Welfare Agency would benefit both.

Removing his shoes and belt, he settled down on the opposite side and within moments had joined Kumari in sleep.



### SOCIAL WELFARE AGENCY COMPOUND TWO DAYS LATER

"I'm surprised you said 'yes'," Elio noted.

"To be honest, so was I," Michele replied.

"Well, we both know the influence 'old friends' can exert, don't we," the Director of Special Operations, Section Two observed, indicating the office around him. Unlike the Prime Minister, Elio Alboreto did show the effects of his job, though Michele assumed a fair bit of the additional grey hair he'd added since they'd last seen each other was thanks to his cyborg Marisa.

After Rico had killed Giacomo Dante in La Maddalena, Jean's appetite for revenge had finally been sated and he accepted the position of Director of Special Operations, Section 2 more out of a sense of obligation to Lorenzo than desire. Lorenzo was an astute enough observer to recognize this and within six months offered him the directorship of a new intelligence agency he was putting together. As a close friend of Pieri Lorenzo and Monica Petris as well as a senior handler, Elio had been the natural choice to become the next head of the agency.

"I was under the impression that the Rehabilitation Branch had their own facilities to train their operatives," he added a moment later.

"Yes. There are a number of military and law enforcement training facilities in Northern Virginia that they make use of. However, I'm more familiar and comfortable with Italian institutions so they cleared me to bring Kumari to Italy to get her ready before we spin up our mission."

Elio nodded, having been fully briefed on the plan when he'd accompanied Michele to the Palazzo Chigi to see the Prime Minister the previous week.

"It was so much easier when it was just us with the cyborgs," Elio noted.

"I'm surprised we kept it quiet as long as we did, but now I fear we might be at the cusp of a new arms race," Michele observed.

"An arms race using children," Elio added.

"Children have been on the battle field since Antiquity," Michele noted.

There was a courtesy knock on the door, which opened to admit Priscilla Meleori, her cyborg Jay Valentine, and Kumari.

"Your cyborg has some...interesting...ideas about food," the blonde analyst and handler informed him. "Lucky for her it's 'Wacky Wednesday'," she added, referring to the cooking team on duty today who were big believers in the concept of "fusion cuisine" – the combining of elements of various culinary traditions into new concoctions.

"So I've noticed," Michele replied, remembering their lunch in San Diego.

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Before heading back to their hotel in Rome that evening, the *fratello* drove over to the far side of the compound where the church, bell tower and cloister and chapter house of the old monastery were located.

"What's in here?" Kumari asked as she and Michele approached a building with an ornate door crowned by a stained glass window.

"Ghosts," Michele replied.

"Ghosts?" Kumari said, immediately moving behind Michele.

The inside of the monastery's mausoleum was spotless - the Agency cared for its dead as well as it did the living.

"There shouldn't be any spiders," Michele added.

"Spiders don't scare me," Kumari remarked.

That earned a wry grin from Michele, and he made his way to a section and slowly ran his hand across a specific row of plaques.

*Angelica Toni...*  
*Kara Michelle Pagani...*  
*Fleda Claes Johansson...*

Surprising everyone, including herself, Claes had almost reached her tenth year as a cyborg before her brain finally gave out, outliving not only her Generation One sisters, but also the first tranche of the Second Generation girls. The Medical Branch hoped that the data they had collected over that time would allow them to extend the lives of the current tranche of Generation Two girls beyond the current average.

"Who were they?" Kumari asked, leaning forward to read the names.

"Think of them as your sisters-in-law," Michele replied before turning and making towards the exit.

# THREE

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## **SOUTH OF PUERTO VALLARTA JALISCO, UNITED MEXICAN STATES FOUR MONTHS LATER**

The Bentley Continental GT coupe pulled off the main highway and onto a parallel road, approaching a stout security station. Responding to a signal sent from the vehicle, the heavy gate rolled back and high-resolution cameras confirmed the Jalisco State plate was on file while another used facial recognition to compare the face of the driver to a list of those registered as residents of the community, quickly finding a match. The smartly dressed security guard on duty tipped his hat as the sleek coupe drove by. The vehicle continued down a private road, turning off to pull into the underground garage of a house set into the hills overlooking the Bahía de Banderas, or Bay of Flags.

Unlike the high-performance sports and grand touring cars that made up Michele's garage in Milan, the garage here included the armored Bentley, a Jaguar XJ Sentinel armored sedan and a Land Rover LR4 Sentinel armored SUV. Michele's vehicle choices for this mission were dictated both by the need for armored protection when travelling in territory under cartel control and by Kumari's dislike of high-performance sports cars, finding them in general uncomfortable and loud.

Kumari removed a CFRP rifle case from the trunk and slung it over her shoulder using the strap. This had been their third hit against the leadership of the Sinaloa Cartel, the largest and most powerful of the Mexican drug cartels and one of those seeking cyborg soldiers.

Handler and cyborg climbed a set of stairs into the main sitting area. Constructed from white concrete and floor-to-ceiling glass windows and designed by a San Diego architect for a Mexican banker, the house spanned almost 3400 square meters over three stories. Belying the open-air nature of the design and construction materials, security dominated the design in acknowledgement of Mexico's high crime rate. Located in a secure housing complex with its own private security force, the house had been built deep into the hillside and the cliffs surrounding it were impassable to all but the most skilled climbers, who would have to pass lines of motion and seismic sensors as well as

a battery of security cameras during their ascent. The glass that made up the walls was actually a high quality thermoplastic polycarbonate designed to provide both excellent transparency and ballistic impact resistance. The white concrete included steel reinforcing bars and para-aramid synthetic fibers to provide strength against impact shock and explosive overpressure.

Unfortunately for the banker, his arrest for corruption and money laundering meant that he never took possession of the home and instead would be living inside a much smaller concrete and steel domicile for the next couple of decades. The home's location, security and privacy made it a perfect base of operations for the *fratello* and a purchase contract was quickly drafted and signed.

Puerto Vallarta and Jalisco State sat south of the "Golden Triangle" of the Mexican States of Sinaloa, Michoacán and Durango, all of them major strongholds of the Sinaloa Cartel and their associates. As a major tourist area, the police presence was extensive and the transportation infrastructure made it easy to travel both within the country and without.