

*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. All other original characters are used with the permission of their respective creators. Inspired by the artwork "Wind Power" by deviantart artist \*wraith11 / Alfisti on Cyborg Centtal.*

---

## **"Secret Base ~Kimi ga Kureta Mono~"** **[Secret Base ~What You Gave Me~]**

A Gunslinger Girl Original Story by Kiskaloo

---

### **CROWS NEST WIND FARM TOOWOOMBA REGION, QUEENSLAND, AUSTRALIA**

"Looks like a nice day for sailing," Fleda Claes Johansson noted as she stood at the back of an orange Hyundai Getz 5-door hatchback. In her right hand she held a large glider and in her left she clutched the remote control.

While October was spring in the Southern Hemisphere, the temperature this day proved unseasonably chilly and Claes dressed appropriately in a black long-sleeve sweater, dove grey miniskirt, black over-the-knee socks and brown knee-high leather boots. She wore stylish sunglasses with yellow lenses and a grey scarf was knotted around her neck.

Dr. Michele Pagani, Visiting Professor of International Business at the Queensland University of Technology, looked up into the sky. A handful of cumulus humilis clouds informed him that rising warm air was present and indicated a pleasant morning and afternoon lay ahead for the dozen members of the QUT Gliding Club present.

"Indeed it does," he agreed as he reached down and retrieved a blue "flying wing" propped up against the back of the vehicle.

"I'm so happy you could come," Amy noted. An 18-year old first-year in the Bachelor of Business Management program and a student of Michele's, she favored a brighter, bolder look than Claes with black jeans tucked into brown knee boots with straps and a scoop-neck tee under a grey half-jacket. Her brown hair flowed freely and glasses with thin red rims perched on her nose.

Amy led Michele and Claes to an area where they could safely launch their craft without them ending up in the blades of one of the giant wind turbines that dotted the landscape of Crows Nest Shire. Michele went first, tossing his wing into the air. He performed a few exploratory circles, identifying the uprising thermals for Amy and Claes, who tossed their gliders up and immediately started maneuvering to gain altitude as it followed Michele's higher and higher into the sky.

As a student in the mid-1980s, Michele had earned *laureas* in Materials Science and Aeronautical Engineering from the University of Pisa under the old *Vecchio Ordinamento* system, in which a student attended university for four to five years and then presented a thesis to graduate. Under this system, the *laurea* and the *dottorato di ricerca* were the only university degrees offered, but one who held a *laurea* could serve in any role in Italian society, including professorship at a university. While working for Scuderia Ferrari, he'd earned a third *laurea* – this one in Medical Biotechnology from the University of Milan. And when Kara returned to Rome for full-time treatment, Michele had enrolled in the prestigious SDA Bocconi School of Management and earned his MBA.

Thanks to his generous donations, both Pisa and Milan Universities had invested him with honorary *dottoratos di ricerca* and the University of Milan also made him a *Ricercatore non confermato* – an Associate Professor (without tenure) – in the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences. He'd given some guest lectures in the European Economic Studies Department and found he'd enjoyed presenting before an audience of young minds listening in polite, if not exactly rapt, attention.

With his research and engineering backgrounds, the Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane appealed to him. He'd met with the Chancellery and after agreeing to fund a few new scholarships, was named a Visiting Professor from the University of Milan for the year.

After about an hour, Amy and Michele recovered their aircraft and made their way to the latter's Range Rover Evoque. Michele opened a wicker picnic basket containing wine and cheese and laid them out on the tailgate on top of a checkered cloth.

Amy, who thought wine in a box was a brilliant idea, squeezed her eyes shut in pleasure when she took her first sip of the Leeuwin Estate

Art Series Chardonnay, considered one of the top ten wines in Australia.

"This...is...*amazing*..." she gushed. She quickly drained the glass and presented it to Michele for a refill.

"I'm so excited to show off my new dress tonight," Amy remarked as she spread some Brie cheese on a cracker. That evening they would take in a performance of *Doctor Zhivago* at the Queensland Performing Arts Centre. "I hope you like it."

"I'm sure you'll look great," Michele replied and Amy beamed.

---

**APARTMENT 4802  
RIPARIAN PLAZA, BRISBANE**

"Thanks for coming," Michele said to Claes as they walked in the front door.

"I think she hid her disappointment well at me crashing her date with you," Claes noted as she headed towards the kitchen. While she'd flown back to Milan when Michele moved from Sydney to Brisbane, Claes had eventually grown both bored and lonely and returned a few months prior to live with him, setting up in his spare bedroom. When she was not exploring the continent, she served as a tutor of Italian for some of QUT's students.

"It was not a date," Michele growled.

"Maybe to you it wasn't," Claes noted with a smile as she poured two glasses of water and handed him one.

"You're reading too much into it," Michele replied. "Besides, she's less than half my age."

"So was Kara. So am I, for that matter," Claes responded as she stepped out onto the balcony of the apartment on the 48th floor of the Riparian Plaza building. Below them, the Central Business District, Kangaroo Point, the Brisbane River and the Story Bridge spread out in the falling twilight.

"You're a handsome, wealthy foreign professor," Claes noted.

"Why thank you, Miss Johansson," Michele smiled, earning him a rueful grimace from Claes.

"Anyway, it's pretty clear she is interested in you and she's trying to find common interests as an excuse to spend time with you outside of class," Claes stated. "Though if I had called my *Professore* by his first name, he probably would have failed me on the spot," she remarked.

"They're a bit more casual about such things in Australia," Michele noted.

"They're a bit more casual about *everything* in Australia," Claes retorted.

---

As evening properly fell, Claes sat at the end of her bed and slipped on a pair of patent leather pumps. She exited her bedroom and walked past the kitchen and through the living room to enter the Master Bedroom.

"Very handsome," she remarked to Michele as the latter checked the fit of his Armani Collezioni classic tuxedo.

"Right back at you," Michele replied, taking in Claes' Akris silk sheath dress in a steel and black tonal geometric print.

"We should get going," Claes said and the two of them entered the elevator and descended to the garage and boarded Michele's Maserati GranCabrio four-seat convertible. They drove to the French restaurant *2 Small Rooms* in the Toowong district in the western side of the city. As they entered the small former worker's cottage, Amy, wearing a black and cream sleeveless bandage dress with a geometric jacquard effect, rushed forward and stopped in front of Michele.

"How do I look?" she asked, twirling. The dress featured a high neck with crossover straps and cutout detail in the front with back straps. Around her neck she wore a bauble-embellished chain and on her wrist a sterling silver cone bracelet. A black satin clutch and cutout calf hair platform pumps completed her look.

Amy's family came from money and provided their daughter with a generous living stipend, so Claes expected the dress was from a known designer, but purchased "off the rack" as opposed to the made-

to-order clothes Kara had worn. Which was a shame, Claes thought, as Amy was a bit on the heavy side and with some minor tailoring, she could probably hide that. In addition to her fashion sense, Amy's long dark hair and somewhat quirky personality reminded Claes of Kara, though no Asian blood flowed in Amy's veins and the only way she could tell the difference between a Ferrari and a Ford was if they were painted different colors.

Beside her stood Jesse, dressed in a black cotton blouse, its trim cut interspersed with sharp white pinstripes and collars so sharp they could cut paper. Adorning her neck was a kerchief, its bright red color complimenting the Negroni cocktail resting comfortably in her hand.

Two years older than Amy and a 2<sup>nd</sup> year industrial design student at QUT, Jesse reminded Michele of a very relaxed version of Monique Blacker. Like Monty, she lived to work and could be as jaded and grumpy as Andy Rooney, yet the extra years of life experience Jesse had on Monty allowed her to look upon the world's stupidity with wry amusement instead of abject frustration.

Claes still didn't understand how they could stand each other's company, as on the surface Jesse seemed the polar opposite of Michele. Jesse lived paycheck to paycheck, was an armchair socialist, liked very different types of indie music (Claes shuddered at the thought of Michele playing SKA or funk), didn't know how to drive and didn't much care to learn and when not mooching a ride from her housemate Dan, transported herself around the city either via public transit or a single-speed step through bicycle that likely weighed more than she did.

And yet at least once a week they could be found sitting across from each other at a table at the coffeehouse in Brisbane's West End where Jesse worked as a barista having a deep, but cordial, conversation or debate on various topics.

As an Italian, Claes felt she knew coffee and when she started travelling to other countries and continents, she had been shocked by the dreck pushed by the big multi-national coffee corporations. So when Michele had taken her with him to *WiP*, for *Work in Progress*, after her first sip she understood why the place was so popular with students at QUT's Faculty of Built Environment and Engineering.

"Thank you for coming this evening," Michele said to Jesse as they took their seats.

"I was going to hit up *Pecha Kucha* at The Powerhouse, but Amy kept bugging me. In the end I had to agree just to shut her up," Jesse whispered.

---

After enjoying a 7-course tasting menu with accompanying wines, the group made their way to the car and started off for the William Jolly Bridge.

"I feel so glamorous," Amy said from the front passenger seat. While she was not interested in cars, she was adept enough to know that the car she was in at the moment was something special.

"I feel so bourgeois," Jesse said and Claes expected she meant the Marxist form of a capitalist who exploited the working class as opposed to the original French form to identify a member of the middle classes since a Maserati went well into the six figures in Australia.

---

"Well that was a couple of hours of my life I won't be getting back," Jesse groused as they waited for the car to be brought up by the valet.

"I thought you'd like it," Amy remarked. "It's Russian so it should appeal to Communists."

"I'm a socialist, Amy. Dan is the communist."

"What's the difference?" Amy asked, but Jesse chose to ignore her.

As they were grossly overdressed for *WiP* they instead drove across Victoria Bridge to the Villager Hotel for after-theater drinks. Around midnight Michele and Claes dropped Amy and Jesse off at Brisbane Central station and then headed home to Riparian Plaza.

---

The digital readout on the clock beside her bed showed 01:22 and it took a moment for Claes to come to full wakefulness. Her enhanced cyborg hearing detected music from the living area on the other side of the wall.

Her throat felt as dry as a desert so she rose to pour herself a glass of water from the kitchen. She threw a robe over her gown and opened her door. Rounding the corner into the kitchen, she saw Michele

standing on the balcony, his figure slumped and a drink in his hand.

Music emanated softly from speakers in the walls and ceiling.

*...my mirror, my sword and shield  
My missionaries in a foreign field*

*For some reason I can't explain  
I know Saint Peter won't call my name  
Never an honest word  
But that was when I ruled the world*

As the song trailed off, Claes saw Michele turn and she could see his eyes were red. She slipped back behind the wall, peeking around the corner as he poured himself another drink and turned back to look out over the city.

Claes kept watch, listening to a man sing about how things can change "in a New York Minute". As she followed along, some of the lyrics stirred something inside her.

*...in the darkness  
I hear the sirens wail  
Somebody going to emergency  
Somebody's going to jail...*

*What the head makes cloudy  
The heart makes very clear  
The days were so much brighter  
In the time when she was here...*

Claes stayed behind the corner, but when the next song started, her breath caught in her throat.

*I've heard there was a secret chord  
That David played, and it pleased the Lord  
But you don't really care for music, do you?  
It goes like this  
The fourth, the fifth  
The minor fall, the major lift  
The baffled king composing Hallelujah*

Claes' mind suddenly flashed back years to the day when she shot Caterina Marinov, a wanted terrorist - and Michele's lover - at the

Piazza Venezia in Rome. As she did, the tears started to come and she quickly fled back to her room.

---

"Would you mind accompanying me back to Rome next week?" Claes asked as she poured coffee from the carafe into two large mugs.

"It's about time for your 50,000 kilometer service, isn't it?" Michele remarked, earning him a scowl from Claes. This would be her fourth and final trip that year. She had lived years longer than expected and the Technical Branch were interested in understanding why so they could both make the newer cyborgs last longer and to extend the endurance of the civilian prototypes.

"If you would like me to, I can clear my schedule," Michele offered.

"Thank you," Claes replied.

---

**AUTOSTRADA DEL SOL  
PONZANO ROMANO  
LATE OCTOBER**

Due to both her younger age and cyborg stamina, Claes felt the effects of the long flight from Sydney to Milan a good deal less than Michele. She therefore sat behind the wheel as the Lamborghini Aventador LP700-4 loped towards the outskirts of the Eternal City. She'd driven the route enough to do it blindfolded and gently shook Michele awake as she turned onto the long drive leading to the Social Welfare Agency compound.

Both showed their ID cards at the security post and the steel barrier pole quickly raised to allow passage. As Claes proceeded towards the medical center, Michele noticed a teenage girl with brunette hair wrenching on what looked like a Caterham Seven, a teenage boy watching attentively. The girl stared long and hard at them as they drove past.

"They have male cyborgs now?" Michele asked. The first attempt to create a male series had failed spectacularly and eventually they terminated the program - and, so it was rumored, the cyborgs themselves, though no male names adorned the walls of the monastery crypt.



"Yes. The doctors identified whatever made the original boys a failure and fixed it. Jay's the first of the new batch, but more are said to be on the way," Claes replied.

The hospital complex was in the eastern end of the compound, placed well away from the rest of the facility. Claes drove to the central building and pulled into a spot marked "Staff" and hung a parking placard from the rearview mirror.

"There was a time when driving a 700 horsepower coupe would have turned you white," Michele noted as Claes handed him the key fob.

"True, but this car is downright sensible," Claes replied.

"A sensible V12 Lamborghini. What is the world coming to?" Michele lamented.

They walked inside the building, checked in with the receptionist, and were escorted to a special elevator with access to a secure wing on the top floor that hosted the SWA Technical Branch, whom researched, developed and implemented the combat cyborg program.

A familiar smiling face greeted them as the elevator doors opened.

"Long time no see, *Professore*," Doctor Fernando Bianchi noted, shaking Michele's hand. He turned to Claes.

"If you'll follow me, we'll start the examination."

---

"It's amazing, really," Bianchi noted as he and Michele looked at the LCD display showing the results of the battery of tests run on Claes. "She was converted eight years ago and best we can tell, she could live another eight. She could very well celebrate her 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. It's a shame she won't stay. She could be a great help to study cyborg longevity."

"She's not a lab rat anymore, Doctor," Michele growled.

"No need to get defensive, General," Bianchi replied, holding up his hands.

"Why do you think she has lived so long?" Michele asked.

"Spite," Bianchi chuckled.

"Doctor," Michele chided.

"It's no secret she hates what we've done to her," Bianchi noted. "But the psychiatrist in me says that as the last of the original generation, she's carrying on the legacy of her sisters. I also believe in recent years she's holding on for you."

"For me?" Michele asked.

"She experienced first-hand what losing first Angelica and then Kara did to you. I think she's worried about how her own passing will affect you."

---

"You're as healthy as an ox," Bianchi informed Claes as they entered the room. "All your implants and organs are working normally. You know the drill – contact us immediately if you feel abnormal, otherwise we'll see you again in six months."

"Thank you, Doctor," Claes said. She looked to Michele, who nodded and started for the elevator.

They next drove to the monastery and parked. The last time Michele had set foot in the mausoleum was when they'd laid Kara to rest.

Claes chose not to accompany Michele inside. She leaned against the wall just outside the mausoleum, idly kicking at stones with the toe of her boot. Not one to believe in the supernatural, Claes nonetheless felt physically cold in the presence of the resting place of her sisters, regardless of the actual air temperature.

Inside, Michele solemnly stepped up to a wall and slowly traced his hand across the bronze name plaques, reading the names softly aloud...

"Henrietta...Rico...Triela...Elsa...Angelica...Sylvia...Chiara..."

*So many names, Michele thought. So many young lives snuffed out too soon. And still they add more...*

At Michele's request, Kara had been buried to the right of Angelica and he'd asked that the empty spot to Kara's right would one day hold Claes' remains.

---

They returned to the car and drove to the large parking area in front of the dormitories. As they approached the one that warehoused the cyborgs, two young girls were coming down the steps.

The girl on the left had long red hair arranged in pigtails and wore a dark brown jacket over a white polo and tan shorts. The girl on the right had long black hair that flowed down the back of her neck and wore a knee-length coat with a unique tartan design with heavy knee-high laced boots of black leather. On her head she wore a beret with a red ribbon and around her neck was a scarf in a similar shade.

"Hey, Duracell! Long time no see." Michele called out to the girl on the left.

"Hiya, General!" the girl replied.

"Are those new socks?"

"Yes! Aren't they cool!" she said, holding up her right leg to show off what looked like a shark with an open mouth climbing out of her loafer.

"Yes they are," Michele said. He waved and passed the girls as he and Claes moved on towards the Handler's dorm.

"Who was that, Marisa?" the dark-haired girl asked.

"That's Michele," the redhead replied. "He's been with the program like forever, back when my Uncle Pieri was running the place. He's mega-rich and has a really cool yacht, though it needs a helicopter pad—and a shark cage."

"Strange that I have never seen him before. Is that his cyborg? She looks old."

"That's Claes. She's the last of the original generation, but don't let her hear you call her old, Emile," Marisa said. "Michele's cyborg was named Kara. She was Japanese and very pretty, but she died last year."

"Why did he call you 'Duracell'?" Emile asked, deciding to change the subject.

Marisa rolled her eyes. "Because he says I have a 'copper top' and I store up energy like a battery," she grouched. "Anyway, we better get to class. If we're late, Mister Mancini will make us practice drill again."

---

In Michele's old room, Claes sat on the end of the bed. Years before, her feet didn't reach the floor. Now, the soles of her dress boots were firmly grounded against the polished wood. At the time she left for Milan, she'd been the tallest cyborg. With the new additions, she wasn't sure anymore. Not that she felt it mattered, but it was just another sign that she was no longer the young girl with glasses who spent her days reading and working in a garden.

And the man sitting at the desk across from her, working on an iPad 3, was the reason for that.

"Why did you save me?" Claes asked.

"Save you?" Michele asked.

"You were kind to all of us girls, but why did you choose me to be the one to shower attention on?"

"You didn't have a handler to look after you," Michele replied.

"I had Jean."

"Some choice."

"He cared about me, Michele. In his own way, as he did with Rico, but I never felt an orphan."

"The honest answer is you fascinated me, Claes. You didn't have a formal handler and you didn't take part in missions. You showed a strong education and where the other girl's lives were very regimented, you were given the freedom to explore your own interests.

"Jean and Pieri noticed that interest and they slowly pushed us together. The more I came to know you, the stronger that interest

became and once we became *fratello*, I wanted to support your desires and dreams. And I didn't want you to end your life serving the Agency any more than I wanted that to happen with Kara.

"With Kara, it was love, but the love a father has for his daughter. Kara wanted more from our relationship, I know, and she never became fully comfortable with your presence because she knew I didn't view you as a daughter and that I did – and do – care for you."

"Altheus was correct when he called you a saint," Claes said to the floor.

"I think Benedetto and the Roman Curia might take issue with that appellation," Michele joked.

"And yet you are still concerned for my welfare even after all the terrible things I have done to you."

"Claes—"

"I've used you, Michele. I didn't want to be part of your *fratello*, but when you told me about Captain Raballo, I was afraid Jean would re-write me so I begged you to take me in, even though I knew Kara hated the idea. I took and took and you continued to give and give."

"That's just my nature—"

"I killed the woman you loved, Michele!"

"Yes you did, Claes. But you did it because you knew Kara would have if you had not. Her imperative to protect me would have forced her to and she'd have hated herself the rest of her days."

"And yet you offered to take me with you and her to Dubai, even though she'd have hated that, as well. And then you somehow convinced Jean Croce to let me leave and attend school at the University of Milan. You gave me your apartment and ensured I had enough money to do whatever I wanted."

Claes turned to look out the window.

"As my sisters have passed on, I've made new friends at University and charted a new life on my own, but I missed you not being there. You have taken care of me and protected and nurtured me these past

years. I wish I could call you 'father' for you have truly been one to me, but I can't help but feel that if I did, I would be disrespecting the memory of Captain Raballo. Would you be okay with being my uncle?" she asked with a smile.

"Very much so," Michele replied.

---