

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.

"Star Drive"

A Gunslinger Girl Original Story by Kiskaloo

Claes maintained a light and steady pressure on the throttle as she steered the Gallardo Spyder along the narrow road that was SR17 as it meandered through the forests of the Gran Sasso e Monti della Laga National Park along a natural valley floor in the Apennine Mountains.

The lights of the *frazione* of Assergi receded in her rearview mirror and the exhaust of the V10 engine behind her provided a rumbling accompaniment to the final movement of the 1919 edition of Igor Fyodorovich Stravinsky "Firebird Suite".

The final crescendo crashed from the speakers and then faded like a wave impacting on a rock face, only to recede a moment later.

When the next song didn't start, Claes looked over and blinked in surprise.

"Are you okay?" she asked, her voice edged in concern.

"Yes," Michele said, moving to wipe a tear tricking down his left cheek. "There is some Russian blood in these veins from my mother's side and for whatever reason this song tends to instill a strong emotional response in me."

"Then I think we need something a bit more cheerful," Claes noted and reached for the radio controls. A moment later, the joyous opening to Ottorino Respighi's "Pini di Roma" erupted from the car's sound system and Claes pressed down on the throttle.

The Gallardo swallowed the distance between the *frazione* of Assergi and Paganica within the running time of the symphonic poem and as they approached the hillside village, Claes backed off on the throttle and allowed the car to slow to the posted limit. She navigated through the city and onto the SP103, continuing south until turning east on State Highway 17.

"Thanks for taking the driving duties," Michele noted.

"Of course," Claes replied. *Not that I had much of a say in the matter*, she noted mentally. As they'd approached the car, Michele had moved to the passenger seat, effectively forcing her to serve as chauffeur. But now that her legs were 10 centimeters longer, it made it easier for her to reach the pedals and the more time she spent behind the wheel, the more comfortable she became.

With Kara on TDY with the Stanaway *fratelli*, Michele decided to get out of the compound "for some fresh air" and Claes readily agreed. Since their first night drive to Lake Campotosto after she'd shot Marcello Palumbo, she and Michele continued to take drives when they needed to "clear their heads" or just have some quiet time.

At first she thought it was just another case of Michele "being nice to her" as he would do for all the girls on occasion, like taking Triela to Berlin with him and Kara so she could spend some time with Hilshire in his home country. Or the time he took Rico to an amusement park to ride the roller coaster after the Lichtenstein mission, even though she knew he hated them.

But over time she came to appreciate the pleasure one could derive from just enjoying the night air and sky, ensconced in a warm outfit and a heated seat as the kilometers clicked away and one day she realized that she actually looked forward to the next time Michele would ask her if she'd like to accompany him on a drive.

Sometimes they'd just circle Rome on the Grande Raccordo Anulare, other times they'd drive into the mountains or when the weather was nice, they'd cruise along the coast. They usually timed them for the middle of the night when Kara was asleep, or at times like these when she was either away or laid up for maintenance or testing. Claes once asked Michele why he didn't take Kara out and he'd replied that she did not enjoy classical music and the high-speed electronica she preferred inspired her to drive with a good deal more vigor than the steady cruising he preferred. Instead, the two of them did their driving at Vallelunga during Track Days or on Time-Speed-Distance rallies like the *Mille Miglia* or Sicily's *Tour della Esotici*.

"It's been awhile, hasn't it?" Michele noted, as if reading her thoughts.

"It's been busy," Claes replied. "And you've been spending much of your free time with Caterina."

"Sorry about that," Michele replied. "I've kind of abandoned you and Kara, haven't I?"

"Not at all," Claes replied. When she thought about how much of a handler's time their cyborg monopolized, she was surprised that more of them did not seek external relationships. She knew Mr. Hilshire was seeing Prosecutor Guelfi, though she was not sure Triela did. And Mr. Ricci struck her as someone who had never lacked female companionship. Of the Croce brothers, she knew Jose could not risk such a relationship with Henrietta's possessiveness and Jean seemed to her focused on gaining revenge for the death of his fiancé that he had neither time nor interest in another woman.

Claes knew Kara was not pleased there was "another woman" in her handler's life. Kara had not been pleased with her joining their *fratelli*, and when she then underwent modification from a 12-year old girl to a 21-year old woman, that caused the jealousies Kara had been keeping down to bubble to the surface again.

When they reached the commune of Poggio Pienze, Claes pulled off at a service area. While Michele topped off the tank, Claes walked inside to buy some cold water.

Around the compound Claes continued to dress in clothes similar in style to what she'd worn before her "upgrade", favoring comfort and practicality. But when she was now out in public, even for something like this quick jaunt to the mountains and back, she made an effort to dress in designer labels because she wanted Michele to feel proud of her. As the Fall weather continued to cool, for this evening her boots were from Sergio Rossi and the jeans tucked into them, as well as the blouse under her The North Face cold-weather parka, were from Chloé and the scarf around her neck had the gold "DG" symbol of Dolce & Gabbana.

As she examined the selection behind the glass doors, Claes noticed a gaggle of boys in their late teens watching her and whispering amongst themselves. With her sensitive hearing she listened as they commented on how attractive they found her and their challenges to each other to be the first to approach her and strike up a conversation. To her surprise, she caught herself smiling at them in the checkout line

and they followed her out at a slight distance until they saw her approach the Gallardo and Michele.

"È suo padre! Fuggite!" she heard them say, and they scrambled back to their Fiat Panda.

With her dark hair, she supposed she could pass for Michele's daughter, but Mister Raballo would always be the one she considered her true father.

"Father was right," Michele noted as she walked up.

"About what?" Claes asked.

"About you being a heart-breaker when you grew up."

Just a few months ago, Claes would have glowered at him for such a comment, but instead the faintest hint of blush colored Claes' cheeks as she settled into the driver's seat and pressed the Engine Start button.

They continued east on the highway, entering rolling farmland as they left Navelli, the road ruler straight with gentle bends that the Gallardo could easily take at probably three times the 100km/h she was holding steady at.

"I suppose if she was behind the wheel, Kara would bury her boot in the carpet and try and pin the speedometer needle to the right," Claes noted.

Michele chuckled. "She does love the sensation of speed, but she's not reckless. It's dark out and this is a rural road with wildlife and she'd adjust her speed appropriately."

A few moments later, Beethoven's final movement of his Ninth Symphony started. Claes shot Michele a sour look, but the soaring music stirred her soul and her right boot flexed. The engine responded raucously and the speedometer needle started to climb.

As the highway reached the hills there was a sharp corner and the road started to undulate to conform with the contours of the hillside. In the daylight, Claes figured the road must be exciting to drive fast,

but the bi-xenon headlights alternately lit steel guardrail, a low stone wall or just trees and Claes positioned the Gallardo in the middle of the road.

Michele selected Gustav Holst's "Mars, the Bringer of War" and the music helped Claes set up a rhythm and soon she was flowing from corner to corner, her speed increasing in concert with her confidence.

They exited out at the *commune* of Popoli and Claes joined the A25 for the 150km drive back to the accompaniment of the opening trumpet to Gershwin's "Rhapsody and Blue".
