

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.

"Yoake [夜明け]"

A Gunslinger Girl Original Story by Kiskaloo

"Heaven is not enough...if when I am there I don't remember you." – Yoko Kanno.

On a warm March Wednesday, in the passenger seat of a Lamborghini Gallardo Spyder parked on the side of the Autostrada 24 in a suburb east of Rome, Fleda Claes Johansson started to cry, her sobs drowned out by the flow of late afternoon traffic though Michele could see her chest heave and see the tears stream down her face. He removed a clean handkerchief from his pants pocket and handed it to Claes, who turned towards him with eyes red from tears and cheeks red from embarrassment.

"*Gratzie*," she said as she dabbed at her eyes and wiped her cheeks. She sniffled with a sharp intake of breath through her nose and her face set in a hard look, only a moment later to collapse into a fresh bout of crying. She buried her face in the handkerchief and willed herself into composure.

"Crying like a schoolgirl rejected by her crush," she said, her tone harsh.

"You were conditioned to love him. And now that you remember him, it's natural to miss him knowing that's he is gone," Michele offered.

"What we shared wasn't really love," Claes noted. "I mean I did love him because the conditioning made me, but it made him uncomfortable." She took in a few deep breaths to steady herself. "I'm okay now. We can go," she said.

Michele nodded and started the car. He waited for a break in the traffic and pulled out, setting course for the SWA compound.

Chapter One – Trial Run

"Okay...Understood," Michele said before closing his phone as he waited for Kara and Claes to exit the building where they were having a mathematics lesson with the other cyborgs, this Friday being an instructional day for them. Neither he nor Claes had spoken of her recovering her memories two days before. Michele waved each of them over as they exited and they started walking back towards the dormitories.

"The final pieces are in place for the operation Alessandro and I have been working on," Michele informed them. "So he and I are will be travelling to Foggia over the weekend for a meeting with the Nabateans."

"Who are the Nabateans?" Kara asked.

"A shadowy Arabic tribe around the area of Jordan and the northern area of the Arabian Peninsula. They were traders, specializing in luxury goods and slaves, but they also provided prostitution services and saw their strongest power starting around the fourth century BC. Their capital city was Petra in Jordan and the Modern Arabic script traces it's history back to them."

"Very good, Claes," Michele said, impressed. "I had to look it up, myself."

"One of the books in Mister Ra—in my library was Travels in Syria and the Holy Land by Johann Ludwig Burckhardt. In it he details his discovery of Petra and that led me to study the Nabateans," Claes replied to their unasked question on how she knew about it.

"Maybe one of the gangsters who comprise the operation is a history buff," Michele hypothesized. "Anyway, we're going to meet one of their senior people."

"Like a *consigliere*?" Kara asked.

"You've been watching *The Sopranos* again, haven't you?" Michele said. Italian television had started carrying the show and it was proving to be popular with many of the staff in Sections 1 and 2. "That's a Mafia term – specific to the American Mafia, at that. The people we are working with are Camorra and the closest term would

be something like *caporegime* – this person will name the *soldato* who will head the operation in Barletta and oversee the *picciotti*. They will also report back up to the *capo bastone*.”

“Shouldn’t I go with you?” Kara asked.

“There is a good chance Matteo Amati will be present and he’s going to wonder why my girlfriend is with me and not back in Bologna at University. He concealed it well at that meeting, but Alessandro said Amati contacted him afterwards, worried about your ‘sense of discretion’. Alessandro assured him you wouldn’t be a risk, but I’d rather not push our luck.”

“I don’t like you being without support,” Kara said.

“Alessandro is taking Petrushka with him,” Michele noted.

“I could come,” Claes offered. She continued on before either Kara or Michele could counter. “I can hang around outside on the street, able to both keep an eye out and rush in to help if needed.”

Michele rubbed his chin in consideration. “I’ll take it up with Alessandro,” he said.

Saturday morning Alessandro, Petrushka, Claes and Michele all exited the briefing room after their final mission update. The drive to Foggia stretched some 400km ahead of them via the A24 and A25 Autostrade to the Adriatic and then south on the A14 along the coast.

“Looks like fine driving weather,” Alessandro noted as he removed the top to his smart fortwo. “You promise not to leave us behind, right?” he joked.

“All bets are off once we reach the coast,” Michele said with a smile as he started the engine of the Gallardo and retracted the convertible roof. Claes slipped into the passenger seat and strapped in, a large book at the ready to keep her occupied.

The drive east along the A24 unfolded without event and within an hour they were joining the A25 at Teramo and cruising towards Pescara on the Adriatic Coast. The A25 ended at the junction with the A14 just outside the city limits and they pulled off at a service area to stretch their legs.

Thanks to a Foehn wind coming off the Majella and Gran Sasso mountains to the west, the usual rain and humidity had been banished and sun and temperatures in the upper teens blessed the city and down the coast.

"Instead of taking the A25 all the way, how about we go into town and connect with Strada Statale (State Highway) 16 along the coast?" Michele offered. "The drive should be more scenic and we can catch a nice meal in Vasto."

"Sounds good," Alessandro noted. "Do you mind if Petrushka and Claes swap rides for the run to Vasto? She's been bugging me about your car."

"I am not bugging you," Petrushka said, crossly. "I was merely noting that it looked like a nice car for the weather."

"Be my guest," Claes said with a shrug.

Michele opened the door and Petrushka slipped in, albeit a bit awkwardly.

"If you'd been wearing a miniskirt instead of shorts we'd have seen your underwear," Alessandro joked, causing Petrushka to blush and stick her tongue out at him.

"When Kara drives wearing a miniskirt she folds her legs like origami in order to get in without putting on a show," Michele noted.

They started the cars and returned to the A25, which ended at the A14 interchange on the outskirts of the city. It became SR602, which they followed past the airport and all the way into the city proper and onto SS16, which went its way along the coast.

"This is very nice," Petrushka complimented. "Does Kara like driving this car?"

"She prefers the Ferrari because it is more of a racing car," Michele noted.

"This is not?" Petrushka asked.

Michele looked over at her and smiled. He downshifted two gears and

the car surged forward.

"Petra..." Alessandro growled as the Gallardo left them behind. He dropped a gear and started to give chase.

"How is your training going?" he asked Claes.

"Fine," Claes replied, her face focused on the scenery outside the window.

"You're getting along fine with Michele?"

"Yes."

"Kara, too?"

"Yes."

"That's good," Alessandro said, deciding to give up on trying to start a conversation with her. Instead he turned on the radio.

They reached the port city of Vasto and stopped for an early lunch. Afterwards, Claes and Petrushka switched places again and they continued on down the coast to where SS16 intersected with SS693 and followed that through the region of Molise and into the region of Apulia. They drove around the Gargano peninsula – the "spur of the boot" of Italy – to the commune municipality of Mattinata, famous as a seaside resort with a number of nice hotels. They checked into a villa hotel right on a steep ridge and the rooms had huge terraces that provided beautiful views of the beach below and the Adriatic beyond.

"This place is perfect for a honeymoon," Alessandro noted, again causing Petrushka to blush, but this time she didn't stick her tongue out.

"It's not very kid-friendly, but then I don't expect you'll be running along the beach or doing laps in the pool," Michele noted to Claes with a smile, though she didn't smile back.

They checked in to adjoining rooms and opened the door between them before unpacking and transforming themselves into their personas for the meeting.

Alessandro changed into his "Niccolo Baggio" persona, adding a black wig, a mustache and what he liked to call his variation of a "rap industry standard beard". He'd left Rome dressed in a long sleeve print button-down shirt in "Italian Plum" overlaid with a beige ornate floral print worn over sand-colored lightweight chino cotton pants.

Petrushka applied her make-up and settled her blonde wig on her head. Her black tank top with small white polka dots, cut-off jean shorts and black mid-calf flat-soled leather boots matched the weather well. Claes went with a loose light grey t-shirt under a white tunic with dark grey shorts, tall white socks and black ballerina flats; an outfit she hoped would blend in with the locals.

To transform himself back into "Donatello Marchetti", Michele inserted blue contact lenses to go with the grey streaks added to his hair. If asked about his lack of a beard, he'd say his girlfriend ordered him to shave it. He chose for his outfit items from his "informal Armani" collection: a textured one-button jacket in white, long-sleeve jersey shirt in gray with charcoal stripes and charcoal micro-fiber pants. Black Gucci leather drivers completed his outfit.

Under their shirts, both Michele and Alessandro wore custom body armor made of the same CFRP fibers that was used in the cyborgs. Though they were only slightly thicker than a heavy wool t-shirt, they met the Performance Level 3 CEN prEN ISO 14876 Body Armor Standard, able to defeat a 9x19mm or .357 Magnum bullet.

After opening the pistol case, Michele handed the VP70M to Claes along with a custom-fitted inside-the-pants holster, which she attached to the belt of her shorts, covering it with the tunic. Michele did the same with his P2000 SK and then placed a slim carbon fiber attaché case on the bed.

He ran his thumbs over an embedded fingerprint reader next to each lock, springing them open to allow him access. Inside were stacks of €100 bank notes: 100 notes per stack and arranged four rows deep and three rows across for a total of 12 stacks. Next to them were six rows of gold Krugerrands in clear polyvinyl, 100 coins per row – one row each of one and one-half ounce coins and two rows each of one-quarter and one-tenth ounce. On top of it all were thirty large treasury bills issued by the Banca d'Italia, each denominated for €10.000.

"We could have a good time with that," Alessandro noted, admiring

the contents.

"Until Jean Croce hunted us down," Michele quipped.

"Why the different types of securities?" Petrushka asked.

"The bearer bonds will be used for large purchases, like the fishing trawler and the transport vans. The cash is an initial 'seed' to pay for operating expenses and salaries. The gold is for payment to the Albanian smugglers, who prefer the bullion to their own currency."

"So we are not here to stop these people?" Petrushka asked.

"No," Alessandro replied.

"But I thought we were supposed to fight the bad guys?" she asked, confused. "Why are we helping them?"

"Since the early 1990s Eastern Europeans have been pouring into the country, smuggled in by Italian and Albanian criminal organizations like the Camorra," Alessandro noted. "However, as the situation in the Balkans has stabilized the flow of refugees has started to drop off so they are now adding weapons and explosives trafficking to help maintain revenues. We hope to leverage this enterprise into those avenues which will help us ferret out both the recipients and their suppliers who can then be shut down *en masse*."

"Things are not always black and white, Petrushka," Michele added. "Sometimes we have to do ignoble things in the pursuit of more noble ends. Southern Italy is rife with criminal elements controlling whole sectors of the economy and the government. As such, we can't depend on the local authorities for assistance and we therefore need to follow more...shady...avenues to reach our goals."

Once they were ready, they returned to their cars and took the SS89 into Foggia for their meeting. They drove to the southeastern edge of the city, through a mix of high-density residential and low-density commercial and industrial zones.

Michele dropped Claes off about two blocks away and waited for her to take up a position across the street from the *trattoria*. She purchased a cola from a vendor and sat on a bench, trying to emulate Rico. Unfortunately, what was natural for Rico wasn't for Claes and she

came across as stiff, but it still worked.

Michele and Alessandro parked next to the *trattoria*. After he exited the Lamborghini, Michele made eye contact with Claes.

"Excuse me? Young lady?" he called out, walking over towards her. "Will you be here for a bit?" he asked.

Claes nodded.

"Would you mind keeping an eye out on my car for me?" he asked, surreptitiously offering a €100 note.

"Okay," Claes said.

"Thanks," Michele said before crossing back to the others and entering the *trattoria*.

After the bright sun outside the inside seemed much darker than the actual level and as their eyes adjusted, the shadows retreated and they identified Matteo Amati sitting at a corner booth towards the back.

"Welcome, welcome," he greeted. "Your trip went well?"

"Fine," 'Niccolo' said.

"You have the tender?" Matteo asked.

"Yes," 'Donatello' replied, patting the suitcase next to him. "As agreed, 1200 €100 notes, €300.000 in bearer bonds and 220 troy ounces of gold."

A waitress came over with a jug of wine and four glasses. She undid the seal and removed the cork before pouring a small amount in each glass. A second waitress placed a tray of *antipasto* down along with a basket of warm bread and a dish of olive oil.

As the host, and to show there was no trickery, Matteo went first, draining his glass in a single swig. The waitress filled it halfway and left, Matteo taking another deep pull.

"Excellent," Matteo said after the waitresses had left, his head bobbing slightly in excitement. "We have identified the boat we wish to use and

have negotiated a purchase with the owner. We are also ready to sign the lease to the warehouse. Now that we have the funds, we can start the operation whenever you are ready."

"You have your crew chosen?" Niccolo/Alessandro asked. Since Donatello/Michele was just the "money man", he stayed quiet and let his "partner" do all the talking.

"We have secured the services of a crew of ten – six from the Camorra and four from the Sacra Corona Unita."

"I'm surprised the Camorra were interested in sharing," Alessandro noted.

"The SCU have been beaten down as of late by the government, but they have strong ties with the Albanian Mafia so bringing them in will result in a smoother operation. They already collect payoffs for landing rights along the southeast coast so we decided to, how do the Americans put it, 'cut out the middlemen' and deal them in directly. Both families will have a *soldato* managing their *picciotti*, but the operation will be overseen by a Camorra *caporegime* who will report to his *capo bastone* who will be serving as our sponsor."

"And we will be making the payment to you?" Alessandro asked.

"No, my friends. I am only the intermediary. We will meet the *caporegime* after this and you can hand him the currency. I only need call him and we can meet within fifteen minutes."

Alessandro looked to Michele, who nodded his head.

"Please give him a call," Alessandro asked and Matteo removed his cell and placed the call to arrange the meet. They each finished their glass of wine and rose from the table, Matteo placing a €50 note on the table to cover their failure to order food.

When they stepped outside, Claes was standing by the car, a slender branch in her hand. "Everything okay?" Michele asked.

"Yes," Claes replied. "A few boys tried to touch it, but they won't be grabbing anything for a bit," she added, whipping the switch in a violent downward motion, the shoot whistling as it cut through the air.

"Excellent. I have another proposition for you, if you're interested. We

can discuss it in the car?" Michele offered.

Claes violently shook her head. "I'm sorry, but my mother raised me a good Catholic girl."

This caused Alessandro to burst out laughing. "Oh, I like her!"

Michele half-smiled and half-grimaced. "I assure you it's nothing untoward. I just need you to carry something for me at a meeting. I'll have you back in an hour."

Claes scrunched her face in thought for a moment, but then nodded her head. She held her hand out and Michele placed some more Euros in it.

"Let me get my car," Matteo said, pointing to a second-generation Lancia Ypsilon across the street. Alessandro and Petrushka took to the smart and Claes and Michele the Gallardo.

"Damn, Claes," Michele said a minute later as they pulled up behind Alessandro's smart, his voice betraying his being impressed with her performance.

Claes' face remained impassive, but a hint of a smile crossed her lips, like the sun peeking out from behind a dark cloud.

Michele and Alessandro followed Amati's Ypsilon west, skirting the edge of a large residential development, the green of the manicured lawns and trees to the right of them contrasting starkly with the dry, brown dirt fields to their left. They turned north just before the road ended up against SS655 and drove along rows of townhomes with the occasional vacant lot between them. They turned left at a roundabout and continued west for a few hundred meters past a long row of still more townhouses, turning right at the end of the street and into a large parking area facing an open dirt playground, a large green park to the right.

Michele handed the CFRP case to Claes to hold after they exited. She placed it in her left hand, leaving her right free to grab her weapon if necessary. Petrushka unclasped the top of her bag, putting her Spectre M4 submachine gun within easy grasp.

Matteo spoke softly into his cellphone. He hung up and motioned the

four to follow him diagonally across the playground to a wall of trees. There was an opening and they went through it and onto a path that ran between two rows of trees. To the right in front of another gap was a tall, muscular man in a navy blue herringbone suit of worsted wool. His arms were clasped in front of him, but all could tell he had quick and easy access to a weapon. The man made eye contact with Amati and nodded. All five went through the gap and into an empty tennis court.

Inside, two more men dressed similarly to the one outside also stood guard and across the way a third man, dressed in a finer quality suit of grey wool stood waiting for them, two more people at his sides. None of the guards made an attempt to check Michele or Alessandro for weapons, but their advantageous tactical position negated the need.

Amati walked towards the man in grey and the two embraced in the Italian tradition. Petrushka hung back, placing herself in a position to engage the guards while Alessandro, Michele and Claes moved forward.

"*Capo Barese*, may I introduce to you Signor Marchetti and Signor Baggio," Matteo introduced.

Capo Barese nodded his head, politely. Michele placed his hand on Claes' shoulder and she stepped forward with the case, handing it to Amati to then pass it on to Barese.

To his credit, Barese didn't bother to check the contents. "I will contact you through Amati when we're ready," he said, addressing his comments to Alessandro.

"Thank you, *Capo Barese*. We look forward to a long and lucrative business venture."

"Matteo, escort our guests back to their cars," Barese said. Amati nodded and collected the four, ushering them out and back to the parking area.

"I'll be waiting for your call," Alessandro informed Matteo as he got behind the wheel of the fortwo. Matteo nodded and waved as they started their cars and pulled out. They drove a few blocks west and then south on SP105 to the SS16 onramp. As they passed an airfield on the right, the display screen in the center console of the Gallardo indicated an incoming call from Alessandro.

"We're being followed," Alessandro's voice announced over the car stereo.

"Is it Barese?" Michele asked, directing his voice to the microphone buried in the top of the windshield frame.

"I doubt it. He's going to make a good deal more than a half-million from us out of this deal. My guess is it's another party like the Basilischi or the 'Ndrangheta wondering why a Camorra *caporegime* is in town meeting with two people."

Michele called up the SatNav on the display, which showed a major road just ahead.

"Okay, let's take the next exit and try and shake them," he said.

"Easy for you to say in your supercar," Alessandro said with a laugh.

They turned off onto the Tratturo Camporeale and went north. Michele turned off to the right onto an unimproved road and went halfway down it, pulling over. He and Claes both exited the car, pistols drawn. Petrushka stepped out of the smart, holding her Spectre in plain sight.

The Fiat Seicento following them slowed to a stop a short distance away and Alessandro slowly walked towards it, both hands in plain view. He went over to the passenger side and a short conversation ensued. The passenger window went up and the Fiat did a J-turn and left the area, turning right and heading back to the city.

"I told them we didn't want any trouble, but if they did, we were willing to oblige," Alessandro reported. Michele nodded and they returned to their cars. They retraced their route to rejoin the SS16 and headed for the city for an early dinner.

"Did you wish to spend the night here, or would you prefer to head back to Rome?" Michele asked once they were back in the hotel, having returned from dinner in the city.

"I'd rather be back in Rome, but won't it take awhile?" Claes asked.

"If we leave now I think we could be back by around 22:00. And I'm up for the drive."

“Okay, thank you.”

Chapter Two – Ripples

"I'd like to stop by my apartment if you don't mind," Michele noted as they approached the Eternal City on the A24.

"I thought your apartment was in Milan?" Claes asked.

"My main residence is there, but when I was in Public Safety I needed a place here in Rome during the week," Michele noted.

"Ok," Claes said.

They drove to the end of the A24 and along the main roads into the city and past the Piazza Venezia. Michele pressed a button on the driver's side sunshade and a gate at the bottom of a three-story apartment complex rolled back, allowing them to pass into a parking area. Claes followed Michele into the elevator and up to his apartment on the top floor.

The apartment was modern in style and furnishings with a large combination bedroom and office with a connected bathroom. The large living room adjoined a small dining room that opened onto a full kitchen. All of the windows offered unrestricted views of the park across the street as well as the Monument to Vittorio Emanuele II and the Palazzo Venezia. Michele opened the ones in the living room to let in some fresh air to drive out the stuffiness as Claes sat down on the couch next to the window to absorb the breeze.

"Can I have a glass of water, please?" she asked. Michele nodded and went to the refrigerator where he removed two bottles of water and then two glasses from the cupboard.

"I haven't had a chance to talk to you since you recovered your memories. When you said you 'remember it all', are you serious?" Michele asked.

"I don't remember *everything*," Claes admitted after taking a sip of water. "But I do remember many things with more coming forward all the time. When I think back on the dreams I have had, the figure I couldn't identify before is now clearly Mr. Raballo. I am confused about one thing, however."

"Oh?"

"Mr. Raballo only agreed to be my handler in order to return to the GIS after three years."

"That doesn't make any sense. Once a cyborg bonds with a particular handler, they cannot bond with any other," Michele replied.

"That's just the medical staff's two-dimensional thinking at work," Claes replied and Michele could hear the disdain in her voice. "To them, 'bonding' means conditioned to love and obey a handler without question. The idea that a cyborg would follow orders because she respected her handler is a foreign one to them. So they think that if they can't force the feelings and compulsions on the girl for another handler, then she's unable to function. But they're wrong. My killing Marcello Palumbo is proof enough of that."

"I made the decision to pull the trigger, even though it went directly against the promise I made with Mr. Raballo. I did that because I respected your order, Michele. I didn't want to shoot him because of the promise, but I understood you wouldn't ask me to unless you felt there was no other choice. I shot Palumbo because I agreed with why you asked me to shoot him."

She leaned back on the couch, blowing her bangs out of her eyes with a sharp breath directed upward.

"And now that I remember when Mr. Raballo and I made that promise, I understand that was what he meant. Not that I should never take a life, but that I should never take a life lightly. That I must think about the decision of pulling the trigger before I actually do so."

Claes drained her glass and refilled it from what remained in the bottle.

"I just don't know what to do. I'm so confused. I can't talk about this with Triela because they wiped her memories of Mr. Raballo and the fact he and I were a *fratello*. And to tell her that Hillshire not only allowed those memories to be wiped, but has also been lying to her ever since would be..."

"It would be a nightmare," Michele finished. "It could undermine the entire program if the cyborgs come to feel they can't trust their handlers."

Claes nodded. She suddenly let out a large yawn.

"Sorry about that," she said. "It's been a long day."

Michele picked up her glass and bottle and took them into the kitchen. He cleaned up and when he returned Claes was asleep on the couch.

Claes luxuriated in the feel of the soft sheets on her bare arms and legs as she stretched out under the covers.

So different in feel to the sheets in my bed, she thought.

My bed.

With a jolt, she snapped fully awake. She looked at the alarm clock on the sideboard and the soft blue LEDs displayed 04:39. She threw back the covers and sat up, looking behind her to find the bed empty and the covers unmoved on the other side. She stood up and shivered as her bare feet touched the cold marble tiles that composed the floor of the entire apartment.

She saw that the door was still closed. She'd been so tired she didn't resist when Michele ordered her to bed instead of heading back to the compound. Michele had lit some scented candles and although the candles had burned out while she slept, a hint of aroma still remained, leaving a pleasant scent in the air.

She opened the closet and saw Michele's slippers, which she borrowed before opening the door and heading into the living room. Michele slept on the sofa, a light throw over his body. The room was cool and she noticed that one of the windows remained cracked open. She went over and closed it. When she did, Michele stirred and slowly rose up.

"Ciao," he greeted, his voice groggy. "I see it's still night."

"It's a quarter to five," Claes noted.

"Time to get up," Michele noted, moving off the couch and heading for the bedroom.

In the kitchen she ground coffee beans to start a pot of coffee as she heard Michele start the shower. She inventoried the food items in the larder and refrigerator and began to prepare frittatas and "breakfast

skewers”.

She started with the skewers, cutting two Italian sausages into thick slices followed by cubing of pancetta. She cored a red pepper, slicing it down the middle. One half she set aside for the frittatas and the other she cut into squares. She took out four long bamboo skewers Michele kept soaked in water and threaded on the sausage slices and pancetta along with the red pepper squares and canned pineapple cubes. She then placed them on a baking sheet in the oven.

Once she had prepared the frittatas, she put them into the oven with the skewers. Both finished cooking at the same time and she was just pulling breakfast from the oven when Michele came in, dressed in slacks and a sweater.

“Breakfast is about ready. I made frittatas and breakfast skewers and browned that foccacia you had,” Claes said.

“Sounds wonderful,” Michele said as he poured himself a cup of coffee.

Claes plated the frittatas and skewers and sliced open the foccacia to add butter and marmalade. She then cut it into pieces and put everything on the dining room table.

“*Itadakimasu*,” Michele said and started to eat. Claes had seen Kara do the same before she partook of a meal, so she figured it was some Japanese cultural thing and let it pass.

“You look a bit down,” Ilaria said to Kara as the former walked back into the room after her morning shower.

“Claes spent last night at Michele’s apartment,” Kara noted, looking at the text message from Michele on her phone.

“Why did she do that?” Ilaria asked, leaning forward on her knees and bracing herself with her hands on the end of Kara’s bed.

“He didn’t say. Why wouldn’t he tell me?”

“Well I’m sure it wasn’t anything perverted,” Ilaria offered.

Kara grabbed her pillow and flung it violently at Ilaria, the force of the impact knocking her over onto her side.

"Hey!" she exclaimed. "What did you do that for?"

"For having a dirty mind," Kara growled.

"You *are* in a snit, aren't you?" Ilaria growled back.

While the mountains still hid the direct light of the sun, dawn had made her presence known in the sky by the time Claes opened the door to her room.

She noticed Triela was still asleep so she quietly collected a fresh set of clothes and left to take a bath. Having already eaten at Michele's, when done with the bath she dropped her dirty clothes off in the hamper in their room and sat under the large tree in the courtyard to think.

In the beginning, she wasn't sure why the Director had wanted her to train with Michele and Kara. She guessed that with the losses of late, they felt it necessary to have her return to active duty.

She understood they paired her with Michele for the training because of their cordial relationship. She did feel he was overly nice towards her, but then he seemed to be that way in general and he did respect her, which made her more comfortable talking to and working with him than the other adults.

She felt confident they would make her part of a *fratello* now, and that raised some concerns. She'd just assumed she'd be paired with Michele and Kara, but now she realized that was more because Michele shared her secret – a secret nobody else was aware they knew. What if Jean assigned her to Marco or a new handler? She still needed Michele's help to recover all of her memories. She also felt more comfortable with him than any other handler because he understood her and she knew he wouldn't submit her for more conditioning which might result in her losing her memories of Mister Raballo. If she was teamed with somebody else, could she prevent them from wiping her memories?

Chapter Three – Commitment

In a private dining room the following Monday, Director Lorenzo and Jean Croce stopped their discussion while a blonde in a maid outfit served their lunch entrees.

"The Apulia mission went well?" Lorenzo asked.

"Yes. Michele said Claes settled in to her role quite naturally," Jean replied. "He noted she improvised quite well. Overall, he seemed impressed with her performance."

"I was under the impression their training had not gone very well," Lorenzo commented.

"I would consider the training performance as acceptable, if average, which I put down to a lack of time to gel as a team more than a lack of ability. Claes' basic aptitude and the skills she learned from Captain Raballo appear to remain intact. As such, I believe that if she and Kara practice and train for missions together, they will become an effective team and with Michele make a strong *fratello*."

"You believe Michele is the right person to be Claes' handler?"

"It's more a case of him being the best person," Jean noted. "He has direct experience leading teams of people in combat, so supervising two cyborgs should not be a serious issue once they gel. Claes also seems to get along better with him than anyone else, which is why we chose him to oversee her training. She spent the night at his apartment last week. Both stated they were discussing Claes' performance at the urban combat course and lost track of the time, choosing to stay over rather than drive back to the compound, but that she agreed to stay over is something extraordinary for her."

"Even with Michele's leadership experience, I'm worried about a second cyborg reducing the effectiveness of their *fratello*," Lorenzo said. "And after the fiasco at Venice, we've lost half of our original girls. By pairing Claes with Togni or even recruiting a new handler would give us not just another cyborg, but a new *fratello*."

"It has been almost two years since Claes was paired with a handler. Bringing in someone new and trying to force the two of them together might very well prove a failure. And doing another deep re-write of her

to facilitate or correct it might expose her to the same condition that affected Angelica. As for Marco, while he and Claes have known each other from the beginning, he also knows she was paired with Raballo. It is possible that he could let that information slip or treat her in such a way that it stirs memories of the Captain. Michele doesn't have any knowledge of Raballo so there would be no worries there."

"Very well. Bring it up with Michele and see what he says."

"Yes, Director."

Michele and Hillshire were in their office in the afternoon when Jean Croce appeared at the door.

"Colonel, if you can spare a moment?" he asked. Michele nodded and locked his computer and followed Jean down to a conference room.

"How are things going with Kara and Claes?" Jean asked as he closed the door.

"I admit it has been tough, but part of that is Claes has been undergoing a full initial training regimen which requires myself as a handler to supervise her closely. That has taken time away from my supervision of Kara and her performance has suffered a bit for it," Michele answered.

"Now that Claes has successfully completed the training, the Director feels that it would be a waste to not put her to use. With our most recent losses, we are down on manpower. Do you believe she is ready?" Jean asked.

"I believe she has the ability to join a *fratello*, but I am not sure she has the desire," Michele answered.

"I see. The Director has decided that he would like you to become Claes' handler in addition to Kara if you feel it is prudent. If what you say is true, I concur with his assessment. She appears to respond most favorably to you so if anyone can kindle a desire in her to serve, it would be you." He slid over a leather-covered binder. "This is her dossier. Take the rest of the afternoon off to review it. I'd like your decision in the morning."

With that, Jean turned and left the conference room. Michele reached

for the binder, but did not open it. Instead, he tucked it under his arm and went back to his office.

"What did Jean want?" Hillshire asked.

"Personnel stuff," Michele said. He finished his report and logged-off.

"Have a good one, Victor," Michele said, heading out.

Michele headed for his dorm. He started boiling some water in an electric kettle and prepared a mug of hot chocolate. He positioned his chair in front of the window to catch the breeze and opened the binder.

The first few pages were the usual security warnings, clearance restrictions, and boilerplate legalese. The next section contained the personal data.

"Fleda Claes Johansson...Born 1991 in Vallentuna Municipality, Stockholm...Looks like I guessed right with the AIK Fotboll shirt for her...Father a professor at the University of Stockholm...Admitted to SWA hospital in 2003...selected for cybernetic augmentation..."

Over the next hour he read her file and did some research of his own on the Internet.

"I didn't know you could play the piano," Claes commented as she entered the Music Room. It was now early evening, though the sun was still over an hour from setting.

"Like riding a bike, you evidently never forget," Michele said, closing the dust cover over the keyboard. After finishing Claes' file he came down to let the music try and help him come to a decision. He pushed back and rose, walking towards the French Doors in the corner that led out onto a stone terrace and the grounds. Claes took the hint and followed after.

"Jean has spoken with you?" Michele asked as they descended the steps. The sun was low in the sky, the buildings casting long shadows.

"Yes," Claes replied.

"Don't worry, Claes. You slip the hangman's noose this time. I'm going to tell Jean I'm not interested."

"What? Why?"

"It's life and death out there, Claes. You've done very well in training and I found your improvisation in Foggia impressive. Nonetheless, I still sense the hesitation...the doubt...within you. I can't afford anything other than a 100% commitment from you. Anything less and it may end up with somebody getting hurt or worse."

"I will! I'll do whatever you tell me. I'll practice hard. I'll wear designer clothes. Just don't tell Jean no. Please."

Michele could hear the fear, even a hint of panic, in her voice and it both surprised and unsettled him.

"I would think you would be happy to not be forced to join a *fratello*," he opined.

"I don't have that choice anymore," Claes replied. "I can read Jean well enough to know that if you say no, he'll get someone else who will say yes. And they'll re-write me so I'll bond with them and I'll forget everything again."

"They wouldn't dare. You've had two deep re-writes already. If they did a third, they'd risk initiating the cascade synaptic failure that killed Angelica."

"Jean is willing to take that risk. Elsa, Angelica, Beatrice and Silvia are all dead. Henrietta is having problems remembering events more than a year old. I think Triela is, as well. Belesario and Gilliani have that new treatment they're testing on Henrietta to try and address it. They'll do the same to me and hope for the best. If I become your second cyborg, they won't need to re-write me. Even if I didn't want to join you, I don't have a choice if I want to be allowed to keep my memories."

"Understand that I do not want you to be forced to forget again, Claes. And I really do not want to put you at risk of suffering what happened to Angelica. But I can't afford to have you decide you don't agree with an order and try and refuse it like at Lake Maggiore. Nor can I afford you hesitating like you did with Palumbo. If you did and something happened to Kara, I could never forgive myself. And if something

happened to me, I'm afraid of what Kara might do to you, the conditioning to not harm a fellow cyborg notwithstanding."

"Michele, I was meant to be part of a *fratello*. Because he lacked mobility, Mister Raballo trained and drilled me hard so I could operate without his direct oversight. On the mission where I replaced that Senator's daughter, when it came time to make my escape, I remembered things...strategies; tactics; attack and defense moves. When we returned to the compound afterwards, I didn't understand why. Now I do. I was trained in them; I'd just never had a reason to remember them until that moment. I know I am not close to you like you are with Kara, but I will take my role seriously."

"Claes, I'm close to Kara because I know her. For almost a year before she came to the SWA and was converted to a cyborg, I learned everything I could about her. And the more I learned, the closer I became to her. Eventually, I decided to try and save her, first trying the SWA's public face and when that failed, Section 2.

"You, on the other hand, are a mystery wrapped inside an enigma. You're almost 15 years old, Claes, but until a week ago you only knew the last 12 months of your life. Now you know maybe 18 months. I've seen your personnel file. It's four pages, Claes. Twelve years of your life, distilled down to four pages."

"Can I see it?" Claes asked.

"No you cannot. And anyway, it won't give you any answers, just more questions. It's all of four pages, Claes, because the SWA knows almost as little about your life before you came here as you yourself do. Your past was unimportant – all that mattered was your future use to the Agency."

Michele stopped and slowly put his arms on her shoulders. Claes didn't flinch, but instead looked up and into his face.

"You need to promise me, right here and right now, that you understand anything may be asked of you by myself; that if you have questions or concerns, you can bring them to Kara or myself, but you will do so before or *after* the mission – never during; and that you accept I have my reasons for giving you an order and you will carry out those orders without question or comment, regardless of your own feelings."

"I promise," Claes replied in a clear and firm voice. "I understand what you need of me and I promise I will give it."

Michele nodded his head and removed his hands from her shoulder.

"Kara is going to blow a gasket when she finds out..."

The slap of the soles of Kara's boots echoed in the stairwell as she stomped to the top floor. She turned sharply right and walked with deliberate steps down the hall towards Michele's door.

"Uh-oh. Looks like Pagani honked-off his cyborg," one of the Security staffers noted to his partner as they watched Kara on the camera monitors.

Kara didn't bother to knock, but instead opened the door and stormed in to Michele's dorm room, closing it loudly behind her.

"What's this I hear about Claes joining our *fratello*?" she demanded to Michele's back.

"Have a seat, Kara. Can I get you some hot chocolate?" Michele asked, not turning around from where he was examining his computer display.

Kara dropped onto the bed, hanging her head and expelling her breath violently. She crossed her leg, her foot bouncing with anxiety and anger.

"I'm not going to bother asking where you heard this, since it wasn't really a secret to begin with," Michele said.

"Is it true?" she asked, her head still down.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"While the training has not been as good as I had hoped – in no small part to my own failings in properly supervising the two of you – Claes has shown she is capable of moving to an active duty role. The Director has decided that with the losses in *fratelli*, Claes is for the moment at least better utilized as an active agent instead of as a test

subject.”

“So why would she join our *fratello*? Doesn’t Jean normally take care of her? Or how about her joining Triela and Hillshire, since she and Triela have been roommates for so long? Or even Marco, now that Angelica has passed away.”

“They didn’t ask for my opinion on that,” Michele replied.

“That shouldn’t have stopped you from giving it to them,” Kara said. “No handler has more than one cyborg. I know it’s been difficult on you to supervise the two of us in training. How will it be to do so in an operational sense?”

“I’m hoping it works out better,” Michele admitted. “I’ve had to focus more on her because she was going through the entire training regimen. Going forward, the two of you will be doing the same types of practice and training so I will not need to split my focus.”

“I see how Henrietta looks at Giuse or even Triela and Hillshire and when I think of Claes looking that way at you, I don’t like it,” Kara admitted.

“Claes will not be conditioned to love me,” Michele assured her.

“I wasn’t conditioned to love you, either,” Kara noted. “And yet it happened because of how you treated me. What happens if she comes to love you?”

“Love is not a single emotional state, Kara. Even two people who ‘love’ each other can experience the emotion differently,” he noted. “It’s also colored by age and life experiences. You’re a teenager and while it’s been awhile, I was one once, as well and I still have dim memories of what it was like. At your age, love is much simpler than it is when you get to be my age.”

“Nice dodge,” Kara commented. “But Claes is a teenager too, even if she looks twelve.”

“If she does, Kara, then we will deal with it. But until it happens, don’t worry about it. Now it’s getting late so go to sleep.”

Kara still felt like arguing, but she nodded and walked towards the door, her head down and shoulders slumped.

"Pleasant dreams," Michele called out.

"Kimi mo," she replied, closing the door behind her, this time much more softly.

Chapter Four – Getting to Know You

“Not going with the strapless Gucci cocktail dress and heels?” Triela joked to Claes as the latter examined herself in the mirror Wednesday morning.

“Not funny, Triela,” Claes replied. Her tan turtleneck and black pleated skirt were both from the Italian fashion house of Dolce & Gabbana and conservative in style, which is why Claes had chosen them when she’d gone shopping with Michele the previous day. She sat on the end of the bed and pulled on a pair of tan Loeffler Randall riding boots she’d also bought. Kara had shown her how to apply cosmetics and she was wearing her hair with the side-knot she’d sported on the boat at Lake Maggiore to try and look closer to her actual age.

“Seriously, you look nice Claes,” Triela complimented. “It’s understated, yet attractive,” she added. Her own outfit of black skirt, black sweater and black leather boots all were from Burberry.

“You all didn’t have to dress up for this meeting,” Claes noted.

“I know Michele requires a...higher standard...of fashion then you’re used to, so we don’t want you to feel out of place,” Triela noted. Yesterday afternoon the handlers and staff were informed Claes would join the Pagani *fratello*. When the meeting had adjourned, the handlers informed their cyborgs. Rico and Henrietta had then sought-out Claes to congratulate her, requiring Triela to play referee. Much tea and cake had been consumed that evening in Triela and Claes’ room.

“Thank you,” Claes said, feeling a bit less nervous. To her friends, it was her first day as part of an official *fratello* and also the first time she’d be at a briefing since the raid on the mountain lodge some eighteen months prior when she’d been a stand-in for Senator Santis’ daughter, Caterina. The second Wednesday of every month gathered the handlers and their cyborgs together for a breakfast meeting in the Grand Dining Room.

“Ready?” Triela asked and Claes nodded. They walked out of their dorm and down the hall and stairs. At the foot of the stairs Henrietta and Rico were both chatting to each other and when Henrietta saw Claes coming down the stairs, her face lit up.

"You look beautiful, Claes!" she said, and Rico nodded her head in agreement.

"Thank you, Henrietta. You look nice as well," Claes replied, causing Henrietta to beam in the red leather jacket Giuseppe had bought her along with white leggings and brown leather boots. Rico also looked smart in a dark grey skirt and long vest with a brown button down shirt tied with a white bow at the top and Triela's brown leather boots.

Kara and Ilaria came down the stairs; Kara dressed in a black Armani business skirt, white long-sleeve shirt and a pink vest with white checkers with her black Christian Louboutin boots. Ilaria wore a t-shirt, jeans and tennis shoes.

"Okay, this isn't going to work," Ilaria noted. "Emergency wardrobe change," she noted and dragged Kara back up the stairs. They returned five minutes later, Ilaria now wearing a dark purple button-seam dress from Christian Dior and black patent leather boots from Yves Saint Laurent - both borrowed from Kara.

"Oh you all look adorable!" Priscilla exclaimed as they walked into the dining room. Along the back wall were selections of hot and cold breakfast items. Claes and Kara prepared their plates and took a seat with Michele, who was already seated at one of the tables. The other girls took seats next to their handlers and over the next fifteen minutes the remaining *fratelli* and staffers arrived and settled down.

Jean Croce rose from the end of one row and walked to the podium.

"Good morning," he began.

At 16:00 that same day, Claes joined Kara and the two headed to the Handler's Dorm. Both girls had changed into evening attire: Claes a Dolce & Gabbana black and gold metallic-stripe dress with black Jimmy Choo leather dress boots and Kara a Versace red silk wrap dress, black leather jacket and black Loeffler Randall dress boots. Michele came down the stairs wearing an all-Armani ensemble consisting of a white sport jacket with black shirt, pants and shoes.

"We're going to need to take two cars, but I called ahead and the valet is ready for that," he noted, tossing the keys to the Gallardo to Kara. "I probably should start looking for a car with four seats in case all three of us have to travel somewhere. Taking two cars on every

mission is not going to be very practical,” he noted as he headed for the Enzo with Claes.

They drove to the top of Monte Mario, the tallest hill in Rome on the northwest side of the city. On this hill sat a nature reserve, the Church and Convent of Santa Maria Rosario, the Rome Observatory and their destination – the Hilton Rome Cavalieri.

While *La Pergola* was a hotel restaurant, it boasted three full Michelin stars. The late March weather was nice so they opened the terrace for *al fresco* dining so the entire city seemed laid out before them as they each consumed a nine-course gourmet meal washed down with excellent wine.

After dinner they walked the reserve and the grounds of the observatory before returning to their valet to collect the cars. Claes asked Kara if she could go home with her.

“You really enjoy driving, don’t you?” Claes noted as Kara attacked another corner at about twice the posted speed. Behind them, Michele accelerated to catch up in his Enzo.

“Yes,” Kara replied, dropping a gear to keep the engine in the middle of its torque band. “When Michele had me first drive his 456, I was terrified. But within a month, I yearned to drive it whenever he’d let me. Now that I have my license, I drive any chance I can.”

“You’re not happy I am here, are you?” Claes asked.

“I’d be lying if I said I enjoyed the thought of sharing Michele with someone else, but you know that any of us would feel the same way about our handlers,” Kara replied.

“I won’t come between you,” Claes stated. “I respect him, nothing more.”

“Claes, you have to understand that Michele is someone who likes to see people happy,” Kara said. “Because of that, he’s going to do nice things for you. And eventually, you’re going to want to see him happy, so you’re going to reciprocate.

“Triela thinks I dress like this to impress him, and she’s right, but only partly so. I could wear a tank top, cutoff jean shorts and sandals and Michele wouldn’t say anything. But I know he would dislike how I

looked. It makes him happy to see me dressed nicely and carry myself proudly. When we walk by a plate glass window, I sneak a peek and see the smile on his face and it warms me all over to know he takes pleasure from my efforts. Right now you may hate wearing that outfit and those boots, but there will come a time when you want to wear nothing else because Michele smiles when you do."

Claes shook her head, but Kara was confident she would be proven right in the end.

When they returned to the compound, Michele asked them both to come upstairs with him.

In the room, he pulled a hard-sided pistol case out of the wardrobe, placing it on the bed next to Claes.

"Go ahead and open it," Michele said. Claes did so and inside was a VP70M with holster/stock and two magazines.

"I was able to find civilian models, but no military. So for the time being, you can use mine," Michele said.

"Th-thank you," Claes said.

"You are part of our family now," Michele said. "You two have a good night. Pleasant dreams," he added, kissing Kara on the forehead.

"I told you..." Kara said as they reached the staircase, sprinting ahead.

Ilaria noticed the scowl on Kara's face when the latter walked into their room.

"The chef have a bad night?" she asked.

"No, he was excellent," Kara said as she undressed.

"Then why do you look unhappy?"

"It's nothing," Kara said as she hung her clothes and changed into her pajamas. Ilaria's first thought was "handler trouble", but then she remembered that Claes had joined their fratello this morning.

"So how is Claes as a partner?" Ilaria asked.

"Too early to tell," Kara replied, pulling up the covers and turning out her light.

Chapter Five – Charity Begins at Home

The wife of the Prime Minister, a noted socialite and philanthropist, held her annual white tie charity dinner the first Saturday in April at the Rome Cavalieri hotel to benefit the public face of the Social Welfare Agency, founded in 2001 to help physically challenged people return to society by using advanced medical technologies and prosthesis and putting them to work in the welfare system. Such a gala would be a natural magnet for anti-government forces, so both Special Operations sections would be present in force to ensure the protection of all the guests and prevent anything happening.

On the first Monday in April, Claes worked in her herb garden, taking advantage of the nice afternoon weather. Movement in the corner of her eye caught her attention and she turned to see Michele approaching. Kara shot from the music room and intercepted him. She could not hear what they were saying from this distance, but Kara suddenly jumped up and down in excitement and hugged him, almost knocking him backwards, before rushing off towards the cyborg dormitory. Michele continued forward towards her garden.

"Kara's in a good mood this morning," Claes noted.

"She asked if she could have a new ball gown for the charity event," Michele noted. "I told her I'd already ordered one and it should be here tomorrow or Wednesday. You will need to be fitted for one, as well. Priscilla has offered to handle outfitting all of you girls tomorrow morning, so make yourself available."

"No chance I can skip this one?" she asked.

"Sorry, but the Prime Minister will be awarding myself and the other senior donors with the Gold Medal for Meritorious Public Health as a thank you for cutting them a five-figure check and my 'proud family' needs to be there to witness the honor."

"Maybe you should not have been so philanthropic," Claes suggested.

"I believe in what they do. I'd hoped they would have been able to fix Kara, but her injuries proved too severe," Michele stated. "I didn't want her to become a killing machine, but it became my only option to save her so I took it, accepting the conditions it imposed."

"Do you think the girl who became Kara would have wanted to become what she is now?" Claes asked.

"She wanted to live, Claes. She could have died a dozen times on that platform or in that Spanish hospital, but she held on. And from the moment she opened her eyes at the SWA hospital, I've seen that desire to live in her eyes."

"Would you take her away from this if you could?"

"In a heartbeat."

"So you have some regrets?" Claes asked.

"I sacrificed a great deal for her, but I did it with eyes wide open. Besides, she captured my heart. I can't leave her anymore than I could leave behind an arm or leg," Michele noted. "The love between a handler and a cyborg flows both ways, Claes."

"I don't think Mr. Raballo loved me," Claes noted.

"I am sure he did, in his own way. You said he taught you to fish and took you to lakes, as well as that you and he would talk about things and he let you borrow his books."

"If that's the definition of love, then you must love me since you do much the same," Claes said with a smile, intending it as a joke.

"I suppose I do," Michele said. "I'm kidding so you can stop rolling your eyes," he added a moment later in an irritated tone. "But everyone wants to be loved, Claes, even cyborgs. Your heart may be artificial, but the emotions we assign to that organ in humans are still real enough in cyborgs, it seems."

Claes weighed asking the next question, but eventually her curiosity outweighed her prudence. "And when Kara is gone? What will you do then?"

"Then I will curse the heavens and blaspheme in St. Peter's. But I will also carry my memories of - and love for - her until we are reunited in heaven. Though, with the way my luck has been lately, it might be me waiting for her..." he said with a wane chuckle.

"Do you think Ernesto took Pia away because he loved her?" Claes

asked, looking down at the dirt.

"No," Michele said, the bitterness in his voice causing Claes' head to snap up and focus on him. "Ernesto took her to deliver her to Padania so they could study her weaknesses to learn how to kill the rest of you."

"But Henrietta said that he fought to protect her and they died together."

"Henrietta is a romantic, Claes. In her mind, to fight for Giuse and then die in his arms would be a fine end. I imagine that colored her view of the situation. Or maybe it's how she deals with killing one of her sisters."

"And yet you said you'd take Kara away," Claes noted. "Why not at least consider giving him the benefit of the doubt?"

"If Ernesto really did care for Pia, taking her away would have been a death sentence, Claes. Miss just one of your daily conditioning dosages and you'll start to feel poorly and your performance will suffer. Within days you'll be unable to function and you'd be dead by the end of a week."

"Maybe that is why he didn't take me with him," she whispered, thinking of Mister Raballo's last words to her.

"What?" Michele asked.

"Uh, nothing. I'm sorry to have held you up, Michele," she said, turning back towards her garden. Michele took the hint and continued on his way.

"Why can't I just wear a suit and add a white tie?" Triela growled to Claes as she stood in the middle of the room the following morning, wearing her pajamas and drinking tea.

"Because 'white tie' refers to the type of dress code, not an actual piece of clothing," Claes replied. "Besides, I would think you'd look forward to looking like a princess for Hillshire."

Triela scowled at her. "I can't believe you're looking forward to prancing around in public."

"Of course I am not," Claes stated. "However, for girls our age, 'white tie' requires us to wear a ball gown with long-sleeved gloves and fancy shoes."

Triela picked up on part of Claes' statement and clung to it like a lifeline.

"So if I looked 13 instead of 19, I would not have to wear a ball gown?"

"In theory. Rico wore a dress to the Opera and I understand Jean is doing the same again for this event. So that means Giuse will probably choose a similar style dress for Henrietta."

Triela's face took on a thoughtful look.

"Don't even think about it," Claes warned. "If I'm wearing a gown, so are you, roommate."

"Good morning, girls!" Priscilla chirped brightly as she strode into the dining room at 8:45 dressed for a warm Roman day in silk linen floral print top tucked into white high-waisted cotton-linen shorts and leather gladiator sandals. For their part, most of the girls wore t-shirts and shorts or skirts with sneakers or sandals, though Rico wore khaki pants since she didn't have a pair of shorts.

Priscilla led them outside to a Peugeot 807 minivan. Henrietta and Rico went into the third row and Triela and Claes spread across the three seats in the middle row and Olga took the passenger seat to the right. Behind the Peugeot was the Range Rover and Kara and Petrushka climbed in the back as Michele and Alessandro waited in the front.

Michele took the lead and the two vehicles drove to the Via dei Condotti, known as the center of fashion shopping in Rome. Beginning at the Spanish Steps, here could be found all the great fashion houses and boutiques of Italy along with their most famous jewelers and creators of leather goods, including shoes, bags and other accessories. It also housed the famous Antico Caffè Greco, the oldest coffee house in Rome and the second oldest in Italy.

Kara knew the area like the back of her hand, since Michele shopped for her there pretty much exclusively when they were not in Milan.

He'd also taken Claes there twice – once before the Geneva mission last May and again when she formally joined his *fratello* – to buy her new outfits and shoes.

Because of time and budget constraints, only Kara would be wearing an actual custom-designed and fitted *haute couture* gown, sourced from an up-and-coming Canadian designer whose work Michele saw the previous fall while in Toronto during the L'Oréal Fashion Week. The others would all be wearing high-end prêt-à-porter gowns and dresses tailored as needed to fit them.

Michele, Priscilla, Henrietta, Rico and Claes all entered the dress shop Jean had rented the outfit Rico had worn when she'd killed Colonel Garnier at the Rome Opera House. Michele approached an older woman wearing glasses and with a measuring tape draped around her neck.

"Good afternoon, I'm Michele Pagani. We spoke on the phone the other day about dresses for two girls?"

"Ah yes, welcome Signor Pagani," she greeted. "If you all come this way, please."

They followed her towards the back where the highest-quality dresses were kept. Rico ran to one of the racks and removed a stunning burgundy sleeveless gown that reminded her of the dress she'd worn to the Opera.

"Don't you want to look for something else?" Priscilla asked, but Rico adamantly shook her head and clutched the dress against her chest, her face beaming with happiness.

"I guess that is one down," Michele noted. "We'll take that along with some matching t-bar slippers and elbow-length gloves please."

With Priscilla's...help...Henrietta chose a brown and gold velvet ballerina gown and both girls tried on their dresses and the necessary minor alterations were identified. They also selected gloves, shoes and other accessories.

While the youngest girls were being fitted, Alessandro, Olga, Triela, Claes, Petrushka and Kara visited a store that carried both original and recreations of vintage gowns and, once they'd made their selections, donned them so the necessary alterations could be recorded. As with

the other girls, they also shopped for gloves, shoes, handbags and such.

After paying for the purchases and arranging to pick them up the day of the event, the group visited some stores that rented as well as sold jewelry to allow the girls to select some complimentary pieces to wear with their outfits, be they single pendants or more elaborate necklaces.

In the early evening on Saturday, April 8th, cars slowly climbed the Via Alberto Cadlolo up the side of Monte Mario, the tallest hill in Rome located on the northwest side of the city. At the top, they were directed by uniformed members of the Carabinieri onto the grounds of the Rome Cavalieri Hotel and underneath the portico before the lobby.

The prominent grill and silver Spirit of Ecstasy figure above it identified the latest car as a Rolls-Royce and it drew the eye of almost everyone in view. A concept car presented at the Geneva Motor Show earlier that year, it shared the basic design philosophy of the Phantom saloon, but in a Grand Touring coupé body style, incorporating a lower roofline and shorter body and finished in dark tungsten paint with a brushed aluminum bonnet and windscreen surrounds. The valets rushed forward and opened both rear-hinged doors.

Michele wore a formal dress suit consisting of a black tailcoat with silk facings; black trousers with two stripes of satin, worn with braces; white plain stiff-fronted cotton shirt; white stiff-winged collar; white bow tie of cotton Marcella; white low-cut waistcoat, also of cotton Marcella; black silk stockings and black patent-leather Oxfords. Michele's suit came from the prestigious Italian brand Kiton, produced by their master tailor Enzo D'Orsi at a cost well into five figures.

From the passenger side, Ferro Milani emerged dressed in a curve contouring black silk gown from Jonathan Saunders with a plunging V-neck, draped sash detailing at each side – yellow on the left and blue on the right, a blue centre sash drape, and a turquoise origami pleat at the back. She teamed this with black patent leather slingbacks from Christian Louboutin with 85mm heels and a Fendi black satin ruffle clutch.

Kara graced the portico in a vintage dress of a relatively simple cut, with flowing lines and box pleats of the skirt in what would be considered a girly pink for her. Pockets in the skirt front provided easy

access to her Heckler & Koch P2000 SK and a petticoat held out the full skirt. Claes wore a black Ralph Lauren Caden Ball Skirt.

"Is that a new Rolls?" the Prime Minister asked, angling for a better look as the valet drove off.

"It's a concept car based on the Phantom saloon," Michele replied. He held out his hand. "Michele Pagani. This is my wife, Ferro, my assistant Kara and my daughter Claes."

"A pleasure," the PM said, shaking Michele's hand and nodding to the three ladies. The PM introduced his wife, wearing the latest gown from Valentino Garavani, and his daughter, wearing a riot of floor-length vintage-styled blue silk taffeta that, combined with the multilayered and tiered silk petticoat under the skirts, making her look not unlike an oversized powder puff. The daughter had recently celebrated her eighteenth birthday and her mother decided this event would serve as an appropriate venue for her to make her formal social appearance. A dance would be held at for her and the other teens in the Ellisse Room after dinner.

They chatted for a few moments and then Michele excused his party so the PM could greet other guests. He put his arm out for Ferro to take and they walked into the grand lobby area.

"Minister Petris is shooting daggers at you for one-upping the Prime Minister's Phantom," Kara noted, indicating with a nod of her head where she and Directors Draghi and Lorenzo stood to the side of the lobby area, drinks in hand. "How the heck did you get your hands on it, anyway?"

"I know people," Michele replied.

Kara tossed him a look of skepticism.

"Rolls just opened new dealerships in Rome and Milan. They sent the 100EX convertible to Milan and brought the 101EX here for some publicity events."

"So they just decided to loan it to you," Kara said, still skeptical.

"They want people of means to know about it and, well, coincidentally I needed a ride for us to an event where a number of people of means would be in attendance."

"You collect coincidences like other people collect stamps," Claes noted, causing Kara to cover her mouth to smother the laughter.

The slowly setting sun refracted off the pearlescent white paint of the following Bentley Azure convertible, dazzling the eyes of those who looked upon it until it fell under the shade of the portico. Also dazzling to the eyes were the two ladies in the back seat as they rose to step out of the car.

Triela wore a floor-length dress in a simple A-Line princess cut of white cotton pique printed with a black polka-dot pattern and black piping ornamentation at the front and back seams and around the hem. Large pockets in the side seams allowed her to conceal her SIG-Sauer P232 SL and an extra magazine.

The theatre flowed in Petrushka's blood and her adaptation of a Cristobal Balenciaga cocktail dress from 1955 of pink silk taffeta with white lace at the hem, a petticoat with hoops supporting the form of the skirt, reflected this.

Hillshire wore a bespoke dinner suit from Sartoriani of London, mixing Italian style with German materials and craftsmanship while Alessandro chose something a bit less traditional from Domenico Caraceni. The four of them greeted the Prime Minister's family and then proceeded into the lobby to join Michele's party.

Jean Croce, looking resplendent in a Carabinieri dress uniform complete with sword and cape, came forward to join them, Olga on his arm. Olga's family had been members of the Russian nobility before the 1917 revolution and she looked every centimeter the Russian Countess in a brilliant red formal gown. A number of members of the family had escaped in the White Emigration to Western Europe. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Olga made contact with her extended family - the gown belonged to a cousin who now lived in Vienna.

"Alfonso and Giorgio are watching the loading area," Jean reported. "Nihad is covering the kitchen and Amadeo is walking the halls. Pietro Fermi and Elenora Gabrielli are keeping an eye on the grounds and the terrace.

"As for seating arrangements, Michele and Ferro will be seated at the Prime Minister's table. Kara and Claes, you will be with Hillshire, Alessandro, Petrushka and Triela at the table to the left. Giuse and I

will be seated at the table directly across from the PM's table with Pricilla, Henrietta and Rico."

"Understood," Michele said and he led Ferro and the two girls towards the banquet area.

As they walked away, Ferro harrumphed in annoyance.

"What's wrong?" Michele asked.

"I had hoped they might at least comment on my outfit."

"You look magnificent," Michele assured her.

Hell would freeze solid before a blush would ever dare color Ferro Milani's cheeks. However, her eyes sparkled like the diamonds around her neck and a smile worthy of the Mona Lisa appeared on her lips.

The banquet would be hosted in the Terrazza degli Aranci, offering stunning views of Rome and Vatican City beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows and the terrace beyond. A total of 20 tables spread across the floor, each table set with 12 places.

Preparations were still underway so guests were escorted out onto the terrace where glasses of red and white wine, along with champagne, were being served. Michele took a glass for himself and one for Ferro, who stood next to Priscilla, looking stunning in a Carmen Marc Valvo bustled silk gown. Next to her stood Giuse, also in Carabinieri dress. The two rode brood over Henrietta and Rico, who were masquerading as members of the "Handicapped Assistance Program" and were in attendance to show off the advanced prosthetic technology of the SWA, though their arms and legs were hidden behind long gloves and leggings to disguise the fact they were far more advanced than the prosthetics available to the general public.

"Filippo!" Rico squealed, rushing towards a man of medium build with glasses.

"Eh?" he said, stepping back in surprise. He stared at her for a moment, blinking his eyes.

"Rico?" Filippo Adani asked.

Rico shook her head vigorously, followed by taking his hand and

shaking it vigorously.

"Who's that?" Michele asked.

"Filippo Adani. He was Pirazzi's accountant," Jean stated. "He decided he no longer wanted to be party to Padania's atrocities so he smuggled out a ledger showing Pirazzi's donations to them. It allowed us to arrest Pirazzi and put him behind bars for the rest of his life, as well as deny Padania a major source of funding."

"Hmm. I'd buy him a drink, but it's an open bar," Michele noted.

After being rescued at Florence and assisting behind the scenes with deciphering Pirazzi's accounting records that lead to his prosecution, the SWA decided to offer Filippo an accounting position within the SWA in order to protect him from retribution by the PRF.

"I've started my art studies again," Filippo told Rico. "Perhaps some day I can show you my work."

"I'd like that," Rico said as she unconsciously hugged herself and shivered.

"Rico!" Jean barked and Rico scurried back to her handler. Jean went over to Filippo and the two spoke for a few minutes and then the accountant moved on into the crowd.

In most charity balls, tickets were sold (or, more often, gifted) to celebrities, socialites, philanthropists and business titans who would schmooze and booze, with a significant amount of the monies raised through those sales going to catering, decorations, room rental, and other costs. Fashion houses and jewelers served as official sponsors, providing gowns and diamonds to the chairs and co-chairs who were chosen not for their prowess at organizing or hosting such an event, but for their power to draw sponsors and underwriters as well as those celebrities, socialites, philanthropists and business titans. For their largesse, the fashion houses received literally thousands of pictures of their latest wares splashed across the society pages and television screens of the city and the world.

The SWA Ball also sold and gifted tickets and drew on corporate sponsors, however six of the nine tables at the front of the room had been set-aside for those who had already donated to the fund to a combined total of just over €1.000.000. There were five levels of

contributors, ranging from "Patricians" who had given at least €5.000 through "Quaestors", "Praetors", "Senators" and finally the "Consuls" like Michele who had donated at least €50.000.

At 19:30 hours the guests were escorted to their tables by the staff, and the Prime Minister's wife took to a dais placed in front of the windows where she welcomed the guests and thanked the donors. She introduced her daughter, who did her best to not look mortified, and then the wait staff started to roll out what would be a 10-course dinner including regional delicacies and rare vintages from Tuscany, Campania, Sicily, Veneto, Abruzzo and Lazio all prepared under the watchful eye of the hotel's three Michelin star chef and award winning sommelier.

As they ate, the sun slipped behind the Apennine Mountains and candles were lit at all the tables as dessert was served. Afterwards, the guests moved out onto the terrace for *caffè* and *digestivo* as the lights of the Eternal City winked on.

The Prime Minister's wife escorted their daughter to the Ellisse Room a little after 21:00. An oval-shaped room with a fixed stage (currently with a DJ station) and parquet dance floor, the decoration, *trompe l'oeil* effects, draperies and architectural motifs imbued it with a classical 'Roman' feel.

"Ah, free of the old fogies," Alessandro noted as he walked in with Petrushka on his arm. Kara was inclined to kick him in the shins, but restrained herself. In addition to the main door there were seven entrances along the sides and behind the stage and staff shuffled in and out of all of them as they stocked the soda and coffee bars along with water and snack stations along the walls.

The room soon filled with the sons and daughters of the Italian elite along with their girlfriends and boyfriends. The DJ started up some mild Eurotrance for, with the boys in tuxedos and the girls in gowns, vigorous dancing was out of the question.

Petrushka and Alessandro moved out on the floor to dance. The youngest of the handlers by a good bit already, he'd successfully shed a few more years through make-up and attitude so he could blend in with the crowd as someone in their mid-20s. Kara wanted to get back to Michele, however she decided to do a final sweep of the room. Two staffers appeared and she immediately noticed their uniforms did not fit well and they were being worn improperly. As she watched them,

they half-heartedly went about their work, spending more time surveying the crowd.

Kara turned and signaled Claes, who came over.

"I think those two aren't real employees," Kara said. "Their uniforms are a mess and there is no way that would be allowed."

"You think they're Padania?" Claes asked.

"The kids are an easier target than the parents and a parent would do almost anything to get their child back. Let Alessandro know. I'm going to follow them."

Kara slipped through the door into a long hallway that led towards the kitchen area. She did her best to keep her heels from echoing off the concrete floor and down the hall. As she approached a door labeled 'Linen Closet', she heard voices from the other side and she slowed, carefully sliding up next to it and placing her ear to the door.

She looks fatter than we were told. And that dress... It's going to be a bitch to get her into the back seat.

The real problem is going to be separating her from her coterie. We may need to get backup.

We don't have time. Jacopo can't leave the van or it will attract attention. Come on.

Kara stepped back as the door was yanked open and one of the men she'd seen stared at her.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Kara immediately looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry, but I was looking for the bathroom."

"Does this look like a restroom?" the guy asked, and Kara saw him reach into his pocket.

Kara unwound, lurching forward and boxing the man on the ears, the impact bruising his brain and giving him a concussion. He slumped forward and she grabbed him, using him as a battering ram to smash into the other man behind him and propel both into a set of steel

shelves. The shelves were bolted to the floor so they did not collapse under the impact, but it did make a racket. Kara let go of the first man and cold-cocked the second one before he could recover, knocking him unconscious, as well. She stepped back, allowing the two to slide down the shelves.

A shadow fell in the room and Kara saw Alessandro standing there, his weapon in his hand.

"You appear to have the situation under control," he noted with a smile.

"They were going to kidnap the Prime Minister's daughter," Kara reported. "There is a third one out in the parking lot with a vehicle."

Alessandro turned to Petrushka. "Take a look outside," he ordered. She nodded and started down the hall. He then turned to Claes. "Inform your handler of the situation." Claes disappeared.

A moment later two waiters came around the corner holding trays of snacks and water.

"Excuse me, Signore?" the lead one asked.

"Event security," Alessandro noted, holding up his fake SISDE credentials. "Two of the kids were sneaking a drink. We'll take care of it."

"Understood, Signore." The two staffers continued on, Alessandro blocking their view inside though they did catch a glimpse of Kara looking guilty.

"Do you have anything to tie them up?" Alessandro asked. Kara looked around and found some linens, which she easily ripped into strips and used to bound and gag the two unconscious men.

"Go help Petrushka," he ordered when she'd finished and Kara dashed off.

Michele and Hillshire appeared within minutes.

"Have you secured the third suspect?" Hillshire asked.

"Not yet. I sent Petrushka and Kara to look for him."

"I have Triela and Claes hanging near the Prime Minister's daughter," Hillshire noted. "Rico and Henrietta are hanging close to the Prime Minister and the other guests."

Michele's cellphone went off.

"Yes. Yes. Excellent. Hold station for a moment and I'll get back to you."

He hung up and turned to Hillshire. "Kara and Petrushka identified the third suspect and neutralized him. He claims only the three of them were involved, but he won't give up where they were going to take her."

"Where is he?"

"Tied up in the back of a Volkswagen Touran."

"Have Kara drive it up to the loading dock in five minutes," Hillshire ordered. He removed his own cell and dialed Jean to brief him.

"He wants you back at the party," Hillshire told Michele after the call finished. "You're one of the major donors and your absence would be felt. I've been ordered to take the three back to the compound with Triela and Amadeo. Alessandro, you and Petrushka will stay behind to ensure no further attempts are made on the daughter." He reached into his pocket and removed the valet ticket for the Bentley, handing it to Alessandro.

Michele made his way back into the Ellisse and found Triela hovering conspicuously near the Prime Minister's daughter.

"It looks like we've neutralized the threat. Hillshire needs to return to the compound with the suspects. He's just down that hall."

Triela nodded and headed for the exit. Michele flagged Claes and told her to help Hillshire and Alessandro and then and then return to the terrace with Kara.

"Triela; Claes; Grab a guy and stuff them in one of the laundry bags," Hillshire ordered as he closed the door behind them, leaving

Alessandro outside to stand guard.

As soon as the girls were ready, they heaved the bags over their shoulder and started for the loading dock with Alessandro in front and Hillshire trailing.

They exited onto the loading dock and about a minute later a black Volkswagen Touran compact MPV pulled up. Petrushka slipped out of the front passenger seat and opened the rear hatch. All but the left-hand rear passenger seat were down and behind that seat lay the unconscious driver. Triela and Claes both deposited their burdens in the back, shoving them forward to fit. Hillshire closed the hatch while Triela took position in the left passenger seat while Amadeo, who'd appeared during the loading, slipped into the front passenger seat.

Kara slipped out of the driver's seat and Hillshire took her place. He put the vehicle in gear and drove off. Alessandro and Petrushka returned to the Ellisse while Kara and Claes headed back to the Terrazza degli Aranci.

The remaining Section One and Two agents remained on high alert, but no further threats raised their heads. Whether the attempt to kidnap the PM's daughter was the only one, or it's failure spooked any others, nobody knew. Jean reported to Minister Petris who informed the Prime Minister, who decided to not tell either his wife or daughter.

By 23:00, the party started to break-up and once the Prime Minister and his family departed in his armored Phantom, Petris released the security detail to depart at their leisure.

As the clock approached midnight, Michele and Ferro stood with a number of other couples along the terrace, admiring the lit dome of St. Peter's Basilica, Castel Sant'Angelo and the Ponte Sant'Angelo. Beyond lay all of Rome, glittering like an infinitely-faceted jewel.

"You can put your arm around me," Ferro noted. "We *are* supposed to be husband and wife, after all."

Michele carefully placed his arm around her waist.

"Rome is a beautiful city," Ferro noted.

"Indeed," Michele agreed.

"That's a surprising admission for a Milanese," Ferro said with a smile.

"When I look out from my apartment in Rome, I see the Monument to Vittorio Emanuele II and the Palazzo Venezia. When I look out of my apartment in Milan, I see the Pirelli and Velasca Towers."

"It can't be all that bad," Ferro noted.

"Okay, I can also see the Castello Sforzesco, the Duomo di Milano and La Scala," Michele admitted.

"Ah it must be nice to be so rich," Ferro said. "My apartment is in Fiano Romano," she added, referring to a commune about 50km north of the city off the A1 diramazione.

"Tonight feels like a fairy tale in a way," Ferro noted. "I'm wearing a beautiful gown on the arm of an admittedly handsome man who drives a Rolls-Royce, in attendance at a grand social event, eating amazing *cuisine du terroir* and drinking rare vintages. Though I suppose for you it's just another weekend out," she teased.

Michele chuckled. "It's been a couple of years since I've enjoyed a formal evening with a woman. Kara tends to take up all my time, as of late. And while she can physically pull off adulthood, emotionally she's still a teenager."

Ferro laughed. "Part of me wishes the bell would never toll midnight and bring it to an end." She looked to where Kara and Claes slouched in wicker chairs with Alessandro and Petrushka. "I think our 'daughters' are approaching the ends of their rope," she noted.

"Well then we should be good parents and send them to bed," Michele said. "I think things have wound down enough that we can all head out," he added and they walked over.

"Ready to go girls?" he asked and they both nodded, rising up.

"Do you find being a handler for two girls to be more difficult than one?" Ferro asked.

"When I was young, a friend of mine entered the seminary to become a priest," he noted. "He noted that one of his teachers stated that every priest should be given a child to raise for five years. At the time,

neither of us understood what he meant. Once my friend became a parish priest and looked over the children of his congregation, he said he came to understand. With first Kara and now Claes, I also have come to understand. They both have been the purest form of happiness I can imagine."

Everyone made their way to the lobby, passing the Tiepolo Lounge & Terrace where live piano music wafted softly.

"Are you planning to head back to the compound?" Michele asked Alessandro.

"Yes. Sleeping beauty here is about to pass out from exhaustion and there is no way I am leaving that car parked on the street outside a club – not that I could find a spot for something that long."

"May I impose on you to take Kara and Claes back with you? Ferro and I aren't ready to call it, yet."

"Of course," Alessandro said, a sly smile crossing his face. "Come on girls, time to leave the adults to themselves."

Ferro watched them leave, Kara turning back for a final glimpse.

"What happened to us being good parents?" Ferro asked with a smile.

"Even parents need a night to themselves every now and then," Michele noted.

Chapter Six – Shattering the Mirror

Sunday morning found Kara and Claes standing in front of the Administration Building. Michele's Aston Martin DB9 drove forward and pulled into a parking spot. Michele and Ferro stepped out and both Kara and Claes noticed that Ferro wore a grey t-shirt under a dark grey double-breasted cardigan and wool knit skirt and Michele had on one of his normal suits.

"Thanks for last night and the lift to my place this morning." She acknowledged the two cyborgs with a nod of her head and started for the Administration Building.

"You gave her a lift to her place?" Kara asked as Michele approached.

"She lives in Fiano Romano so it was a quick drive from the apartment to her place so she could shower and change. She couldn't very well come back here in a gown," Michele said. He turned and joined Ferro, leaving a stunned Kara and Claes in their wake.

The girls went inside and ate breakfast in the cafeteria, followed by heading to the briefing room where they found Jean Croce standing at the front with Elenora Gabrielli and Pietro Fermi. A moment later Michele entered.

"And to what do we owe Section 1's visit?" he asked, though his tone was friendly.

"Section One has been working with Public Safety on tracking a new cell of PRF terrorists who we believe are planning a bombing somewhere in Rome," she stated. "The cell has formed in the wake of Giacomo Dante's actions in Venice, though it is composed of known PRF operatives.

"While a new cell, they are very active. We believe they are responsible for over a dozen bombings against government and transportation assets across Northern and Central Italy. They employ very specialized bombs that do significant structural damage, but are very localized in their effect, so they seldom injure anyone. We therefore believe at least the person making their bombs worked in commercial or military demolitions."

"Two days ago we identified the leader of the cell, Damiano Peretti, at Termini Station," Pietro Fermi added. "His normal haunts are Bologna so we do not know if he was in transit or if he was scoping the station out as a possible target. Public Safety has increased surveillance at Termini, without any sightings reported.

"We followed Damiano to a house in the suburb of Finocchio where he met with three people – one we believe is the bomb-maker. A few hours ago two more known PRF operatives were picked up at a bus station and driven to the house. We've been able to track them backwards through Austria and Slovenia and into Croatia. We believe these two are carrying the explosives that will be used in whatever attack they are planning."

"We believe that within the next 24 to 48 hours they will carry out an attack so Section 2 has been tasked with taking out the cell," Jean Croce reported. "We've decided to send your *fratello*, Michele, to minimize the number of agents necessary. Agent Gabrielli will accompany you as a liaison. There will be a Section One team in a house across the street to support you if necessary and there will be another team at the intersection of SS6 and SP67a as well as SP67a and the A1 to prevent a vehicular escape. We leave in sixty minutes so get ready," he ordered.

The black Citroën C6 slowly drove the streets of the Finocchio suburb of Rome. This suburb was mostly a mix of single and multi-family residences bordering small communal farm plots. Michele drove with Gabriella in the passenger seat beside him. In back Claes and Kara sat. To anyone watching, they appeared to be a family out for a drive. The car was a rental, secured under a cover name, and the license plate swapped with a fake that would not show up on any records.

The car slowed to a stop, pulling off onto the dirt strip at the side of the road. Inside, Michele turned to the back seat.

"Okay girls, I know this is with no notice, but you've trained together for weeks so it should be a piece of cake. Claes, follow Kara's instructions and remember to clearly identify your targets before you engage."

Claes removed her glasses and put them in her case, placing the case in the seat pocket in front of her. She followed Kara out of the car and started down the street. Kara was dressed in business attire – a black

skirt that ended just above the knees with a burgundy dress shirt and black blazer while Claes wore a white sweater and a red plaid miniskirt. Both girls wore leather boots – Kara's black and Claes' brown – and Claes carried a black and aluminum suitcase.

Kara walked down the street out front. She came up the walk of the target house and removed a writing pad before knocking on the door. She heard the bolt release and a man cracked the door to the limit the locking chain allowed.

"Yeah?" he said.

"Good afternoon, sir. I'm with the Ministry of Agriculture and we're doing a survey of communal farms in the area..."

Claes went around behind the house, walking along between rows of plants. The dirt was soft so she made a point of moving her feet to the side or forward with each step to obliterate the soles of her boots making a usable print. As she reached the back of the house, she quickly crossed over to the back door, which was located about a meter up and accessed via a stone staircase. She opened the case to reveal an MP5K-PDW with the stock folded and secured, two magazines with 30 subsonic rounds each, a sound suppressor and a leather case where a box of bullets would normally be found. On the other side was a cardboard-coated padded envelope taped to the foam. She removed the gun and screwed on the sound suppressor before snapping in place a 30 round magazine with subsonic rounds. She set the trigger to 3-round burst and armed the rifle and then slung it over her right shoulder via the strap.

She tried the doorknob and found it locked. She took out a blank plastic card and ran it between the doorjamb, detecting that the deadbolt was set. She replaced the card and twisted the knob, using her strength to bend and finally shear the locking pin and jamming the locking tongue in the retracted position.

Out front, Kara "dropped" her writing pad.

"*Merde*," she cursed, leaning over on her side and bracing herself with her left hand to pick it up. As she did so, she pirouetted on her left leg and high-kicked with her right, the sole of her boot slamming into the door with enough force to shear the chain off the wall and knock it

back into the man, causing him to fall flat on his ass.

As she kicked out, Kara reached into her jacket and removed a Beretta 93R with a suppressor. She'd practiced for two days straight drawing the weapon from various positions and the holster itself was customized specifically to hold the weapon with the suppressor attached. She'd expected she'd have the element of surprise so the extra second or two it took to draw the weapon didn't matter. She'd set the pistol for three-round semi-automatic fire, giving her seven squeezes of the trigger with the 21 subsonic rounds in the magazine.

Claes heard Kara say the "go" word and used the railings on either side of the landing to lift herself off the ground. She put her legs together and kicked out to the left of the deadbolt. The soles of her boots hit with sufficient force to cause the door to fail around the deadbolt and swing inward.

Claes secured her MP5 and stormed into the house. She found herself in a laundry room and at the far end she saw a door leading into the kitchen with a man sitting at the table. He looked up when Claes breached the door and his mind was still trying to comprehend what happened when Claes raised her MP5 and put two sets of three rounds into his torso.

Kara stepped into the front entryway, putting three rounds into the man's chest as she closed the door with a foot sweep. Before her was a staircase leading up to the second floor and to the left was a doorway. She went left into the living room and saw two men rising from the couch to see what was happening. Kara pulled the trigger once at each, the two flights of three rounds inflicting mortal wounds.

"Front clear," Kara called over the tactical radio. She heard Claes acknowledge the back was clear and Kara saw her come through the kitchen a moment later.

They'd killed four of six, which meant the other two were likely upstairs. While they'd used suppressed weapons, they had made a racket coming in so they proceeded up the stairs under the impression that they were expected.

Claes went first because of her stronger armoring. At the top, she removed a square mirror and slowly maneuvered it around the corner,

the reflection showing that the hall was empty and the doors closed.

They both entered the hall, staying low on bent knees. They reached up and each slowly turned the doorknobs. When no bullets streamed through the door, they pushed the door open and on one knee rotated into position. Both rooms were dark with drawn shades. They rose up and each saw a shape in the bed, so they emptied six rounds into the upper area, moving forward to rip the sheets off from the end of the bed to reveal the bodies.

"That's six," Kara noted, but there were still three more closed doors so they carefully checked each room, finding two bathrooms and an office, all empty.

"Magny-Cours has been secured," Kara reported over the tactical radio. "No casualties."

"Acknowledged," Michele's voice came. "Place your present and extricate."

"*Hai*," Kara replied. Kara went into the office and removed the laptop on the desk and rifled through the paperwork, pulling anything that looked interesting.

Claes went downstairs and after verifying they were dead, pulled their wallets to empty them of any cash as well as stripping them of any valuables. She also snapped their pictures with a compact digital camera. Once done, she placed the mirror on the coffee table in front of the couch and from her bag removed a test-tube containing cocaine powder. She sprinkled it around the table and returned the tube to the bag. She pulled a chair from the kitchen and placed it in front of the coffee table, kicking it back with her boot to simulate someone having abruptly risen from it. All of this would hopefully place the idea in a forensics team that a drug deal went sour here.

Both cyborgs wore custom gloves that fit them like second skins, though it was really unnecessary as the girls had artificial finger and palm prints that look smudged so it was unlikely the forensics team would bother taking them, assuming they were unusable. If they did, the prints were designed by supercomputers to be effectively impossible to accurately scan so it would also return an unusable result. Claes opened the front door and wiped Kara's boot print off the door before closing it.

Kara came down from the upstairs with the materials and headed to the back. They removed two linen tote bags and secured the explosives and electronics in them along with the laptop, valuables and papers. They exited out the back and walked back to the main road where Michele and Elenora picked them up.

"Six targets identified and eliminated," Kara reported once she'd settled in. "We planted the drug evidence and recovered a laptop and some papers along with the explosives."

Michele refrained from asking about Claes' performance, choosing to debrief Kara separately later.

They arrived back at the SWA compound and Michele asked Kara to accompany him and Elenora to drop off the materials the girls had recovered. He instructed Claes to clean her weapon and that she had the rest of the day off.

"So how did she do?" Michele asked, referring to Claes.

"She took down two of the five very clean and neat. She then handled the post-op work fine," Kara summarized.

"Good. I admit to being a bit worried about how she would do in real action, but this assuages my worries. Once we drop the stuff off you're free this evening, as well," Michele said.

Director Lorenzo looked at Michele and Elenora. As always, Jean Croce hovered next to his chair. Michele had come to referring to him in his mind as the "Black Pope" after the Superior General of the Society of Jesus, so named because of the black vestments they wore and the belief they were second only to the Pontiff himself in power.

"They successfully killed all six operatives without injury or detection. They recovered a laptop, explosives, and other items of interest. They also successfully planted the drug evidence," Michele reported.

Lorenzo nodded. "Agent Gabrielli?"

"Our contacts in Telecom Italia report that there have been a number of attempted calls to the phones Claes recovered. We're attempting to trace them back."

"How did Claes perform?" Jean asked Michele.

"Kara reports she engaged and eliminated two targets and performed her duties without incident," Michele replied.

"Very good. Thank you, Michele. Express my congratulations to Kara and Claes," Lorenzo said and Michele and Elenora took the hint and excused themselves. She returned to Section One while he retired to his office and wrote up his official Mission Report.

Chapter Seven – Meet the Parents

Claes, dressed in her pajamas, stood before the open doors of the wardrobe and sighed. Behind her on the table lay a dress carrier in saddle leather with the Aston Martin logo on it, part of the luggage set Michele purchased with his DB9 and she needed to fill it with three outfits for the weekend.

While not a simple girl, she did not appreciate needless complexity. In her mind, clothes were a simple and straightforward matter. She found pants and jeans constraining, so she preferred shorts and miniskirts along with t-shirts for a top. Colder temperatures necessitated the addition of tights, boots and a sweater or jacket.

Her wardrobe up until last week reflected this simplicity: one pair each of boots, sneakers and flats; one denim and two fabric miniskirts; a pair of chino shorts; a sweater and a sweater vest; a jacket; a jersey dress; a long-sleeved button down shirt; and a couple of t-shirts.

When she'd returned from one day's shopping with Michele, in an armful of bags rested two pairs of boots and a pair of flats; one informal and one formal dress; two jackets; multiple skirts and tops; a new watch and cosmetics. The names of the stores they'd visited and the brands on the clothes for the most part didn't register with her, though some names she identified from listening to Kara and Petrushka prattle on about their own wardrobes. The prices did register, however. She'd heard from Triela that Michele spent a fortune on Kara's clothes and she now firmly believed it.

No longer could she just decide on her outfit based on the weather. She now had to take into account what activities her day would entail. For class instruction or a personal day she could get away with her old clothes, while training necessitated a particular type of outfit depending on the location and type of training.

Days like these, however, when she went out in public with Michele, made her head hurt. She needed to match the top with the bottom in both color and style and then decide whether to go with boots or flats. And that decision no longer rested on the temperature, since Kara often wore boots in warmer weather when she felt it better complimented her outfit so now Claes felt she needed to take that into account, as well. And with the money Michele spent on the clothes, his now being her handler and Kara's comments in the Ferrari, she felt

obligated to wear them.

She rifled through the various dresses and tops before decided on a long-sleeve tee and matching skirt in a burgundy and maroon check print from Burberry according to the labels, placing both over the back of a chair. She looked over her shoe collection, grabbing her black dress boots since they were closest to hand and placing them next to the chair.

That covered today. Now for the weekend...

"So you're having Easter Brunch with Michele's parents tomorrow?" Triela asked, sensing that Claes' frustration level might be lower.

"That's what he said. He's still trying to figure out how to introduce us."

"I've been with Hillshire for years, yet he's never taken me to meet his parents," Triela noted. "Until Michele and Kara took me last September I'd never even been to Germany."

Claes mumbled something incoherent as she laid a white dress on the chair, followed by her pair of suede flats.

"Are you excited?"

"No," Claes replied. "I'm going to need to dress up and memorize a cover story and try and make pleasant conversation with people I've never met and survive the entire ordeal without going unconscious from boredom."

"Have you asked Michele to let you stay behind?"

"I just joined his *fratello*, Triela. I don't think it would be a good idea to start pushing back on his authority."

"Just makes some sad eyes at him and melt his heart," Triela joked. This earned her a dark scowl from Claes and Triela skulked back to the safety of her lower bunk.

The previous afternoon, Claes joined Michele and Kara in the cafeteria for lunch. While not a devout Catholic, Michele still observed the Good Friday practice of fasting and therefore took only lunch as his one

meal. Neither Kara nor Claes were religious and their physiology prevented them from fasting.

"We'll be meeting my family for dinner," Michele informed them. "They live in Monza in a private residential enclave just east of the Parco di Monza and near the Golf Club Milano. We will also be attending Easter Vigil at Monza Cathedral with them so be sure to pack a nice dress for the service. While much of Milan practices the Ambrosian Rite, Monza follows the Roman Rite. Personally, don't worry about learning it. Just follow what the old ladies do."

After she packed, Claes made her way to the cafeteria in the main administration building. When she entered she saw Kara in line, dressed in a bright pink t-shirt over a black cotton miniskirt with black patent leather boots. Whether through makeup, hairstyle, outfit or a combination of all three, Claes thought Kara looked a number of years older.

"Good morning, Claes," Michele greeted. "You didn't need to dress-up for the drive, so if you'd like to change into something more comfortable for the trip, please do. It will take a bit over five hours and we'll stop at a rest area around the halfway mark."

"I'm happy with this if you are," Claes said.

"Yes," Michele replied, stealing a glance at Kara. They both entered the line and filled their trays. When they returned to the table, Michele began the 'briefing'.

"My uncle Alberto met Kara last summer when he went flying with us, but this is the first time for my parents. All of them believe Kara is a 22 year-old fourth-year exchange student from the University of Tokyo studying for the Japanese equivalent of her *Laurea Magistrale* in international law at the Sapienza University of Rome, which is why you may have noticed her changed appearance. My family believes I work in the General Affairs and External Relations Council under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs so our cover is we met at an EU function last summer and have been dating off and on since."

"And my cover?" Claes asked,

"I am going to take advantage of three things: your Swedish heritage, your knowledge of Italian arts, and your ability to pass for a 16-year

old. Your cover will be a first year Arts Programme gymnasium student at a *Kunskapsskolan* – a knowledge school – who is visiting Italy for a semester to study the local architecture and art. How you ended up with us is your host family lives in my building and we've formed a friendship over the past three months. They're going to have a medical emergency and I agreed to take you with Kara and I."

"Convenient, but plausible," Claes noted, nodding her head.

"Well the daughter option wouldn't work and this way there is precedent if you're ever with me again when I run into a member of the family or friends," Michele noted.

After breakfast, Claes returned to her room and double-checked everything before heading down the stairs to Michele's new Aston Martin DB9 coupe. As she placed her bag into the trunk next to Michele's suitcase, Kara appeared carrying her own saddle leather dress carrier that she placed on top of Claes'. Claes slipped into the back seat, which an adult would find hopelessly tight, but she found comfortable enough. Kara settled into the passenger seat and then moved it forward a bit to give Claes additional legroom. Michele pushed the crystal "Start" button on the center console and the 6.0L V12 rumbled to life, though the heavy sound insulation muted the noise as they headed out.

Though Italy did not deem Good Friday worthy of a national holiday, that did not discourage people from making it a four-day weekend and the lack of traffic on the A1 this Holy Saturday allowed them to reach Milan ahead of schedule, arriving at Michele's apartment in the early afternoon. Michele pulled up to a gated garage and drove into his assigned parking spot. They went through the lobby to the hallway leading to the four loft apartments and Michele used his access 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.

This 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 and furnished as a study with bookshelves on the walls and comfortable leather chairs.

Another staircase above the first led to the third floor, with a small office area in front looking out over the park and in back a bedroom with two full-size beds and an on-suite full bathroom.

"You and Kara will share this bedroom," Michele informed her. "Kara uses the bed on the left, so you can have the one on the right. You'll need to speak with her about closet and dresser space. I know she keeps some clothes here, but there should be space for your items. If you'd like to do the same, feel free." Claes placed her dress carrier on the second bed and then rejoined Michele. 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 Parco Solari and Milan.

"This is a beautiful place," Claes complimented.

"Thank you. I considered selling it when I took the position with Public Safety in Rome, but I decided I wanted a place to be able to escape to and it makes a convenient base when operating in the North."

"I think you look older with your hair in the side-knot and the bangs forward of your shoulder," Kara suggested as Claes examined herself in the mirror.

"Okay," Claes replied and let Kara style her hair following Petrushka's instructions. When she finished, Claes applied her own makeup and then dressed. Kara donned a silk cr me cinched waist dress with pointed-toe leather skimmers and touched-up her own hair and makeup.

When they left their bedroom they saw Michele coming down the stairs dressed in a white textured jacket, striped jersey shirt and micro-fiber dress slacks and black dress shoes. They proceeded to the garage and started for Monza.

"A little background on my family, Claes. My father's name is Nicola and he is a retired *Generale di Divisione Aerea* in the Aeronautica Militare. My mother, Arianna, trained as an aerospace engineer; her family founded the aircraft maker Piccolo S.p.A. and she worked on a number of Airbus civil aviation programs. My uncle Alberto now flies the Boeing 777 for Alitalia and used to be a Tornado driver in the Aeronautica Militare. He is the one who taught me to fly and instill a love for it."

Claes nodded, committing it all to memory. They drove northeast out of Milan, skirting Monza and on to the eastern edge of the Parco di Monza. They turned off the highway and into a mix of agricultural, residential and industrial zones and approached a private drive that led to a gated community. They checked in at the gate and proceeded on a street with six modern-style villas arranged in a very wide arc around a massive circle drive with a park area in the middle. Each villa sat on a quarter hectare, beautiful brickwork and ornamental trees screening each lot from the other. Michele pulled into the drive of the third villa and parked in front of the villa. As they exited the car, an elderly gentleman in a suit stepped out onto the front porch.

"Welcome home, son," he said in a clear, loud voice.

"Thank you, *Generale*," Michele replied as he approached. "I'd like to introduce you to Claes." Claes roughly pulled off a curtsey.

"*Välkommen till mitt hem*," Nicola said to Claes in Swedish, and Michele froze, forgetting his father had visited Sweden during the formation of the "Partnership for Peace" program instituted by NATO after the collapse of the Warsaw Pact.

"*Tack för din gästfrihet*," Claes replied and Michele started to breath again.

"And you must be Kara," he said. Kara replied with a deep bow. "Well, come inside all and I will introduce you to my wife."

"I didn't know you could speak Swedish," Michele whispered to Claes.

"I'd never had the opportunity before today," she replied and followed Nicola into the house.

A large staircase dominated the entrance foyer, providing access to the upper and lower levels of the home. He escorted them to a large living room that looked out onto the back porch and the grounds beyond, which included a swimming pool. He motioned for them to all take seats as an attractive woman just shy of sixty appeared from the kitchen area and gave Michele a hug. A second set of introductions occurred and then Arianna asked her husband and son to help her bring out some refreshments.

"Kara is very beautiful," Arianna noted to Michele as they walked into the kitchen.

"That Swedish girl will be breaking hearts soon enough, as well," Nicola added, neither of them knowing that both girl's superior hearing allowed their words to be picked up.

Kara and Claes both flushed red, looking towards each other. When they then realized that the other had heard, they flushed even deeper. Kara picked up a magazine from the coffee table and handed another to Claes, a few moments furious fanning necessary to restore a normal complexion to both their faces before the refreshments arrived.

The five of them spent a bit of time getting to know each other over a light meal and wine. By then dusk had fallen so they prepared to head to the cathedral. Michele started his parent's Bentley Continental Flying Spur and backed it out onto the carport in front of the rear entryway.

"Ooh, a Bentley. I drove an Arnage last—," Kara began and then stopped. "I mean I drove *in* an Arnage last month with Michele. A very comfortable car."

Nicola took the front passenger seat and Arianna and Kara bracketed Claes on the bench seat in back. Fortunately for them, the Cathedral made available a number of parking spaces for invited guests and this included the Pagani party. People filled the area in front of the cathedral, surrounding the lit Easter fire awaiting the start of the Easter Vigil. Behind them, Monza Cathedral lay in darkness, all the candles and lamps inside having been extinguished on Holy Thursday.

With the Archbishop of Milan overseeing the Easter Vigil at Milan Cathedral, one of the auxiliary bishops presided over the services here. He blessed first the Easter fire followed by the Paschal candle, which he lit from the Easter fire. The rite of the *Lucernarium* (The Service of Light) followed, the Pagani party lighting their own candles from the Paschal candle and taking their place towards the front of the cathedral. When the Easter vigil mass finished, they made their way back to the car and home where everybody retired for the evening.

Both girls slept in Easter Sunday and awoke almost simultaneously to prepare for the day. Claes dressed in a Burberry ruffle polo dress while Kara slipped on a check dress from the same designer. They packed everything else into their luggage and made their way downstairs to

meet up with Michele and drive back to Monza.

"Easter greetings," Arianna said with a wide smile as she greeted them at the door. "Mimosa?" she offered once they were in the large professional kitchen, pointing to a silver tray with champagne and fresh-squeezed orange juice chilling in ice buckets on the sideboard. Michele prepared three in champagne flutes, handing two to the girls and taking one for himself.

"I hope you two are hungry this morning," Nicola stated as he transferred slices of ham to a platter.

Kara and Claes could not respond as they stood in awe of the sheer feast arrayed before them on the center island: crepes; Eggs Benedict; a baked French toast casserole; roasted asparagus; ham and Fontina frittatas; herb-roasted potatoes; *quiche au gruyere*; a selection of cheeses and cold cuts; a selection of fruits with crème fresh and Mascarpone for dipping and pastries and breads.

They filled their plates and then proceeded to the dining room. The dining table was set for five, with a place for Michele in the middle and Kara and Claes on either side across from a place set for Nicola and Arianna. They stuffed themselves silly, laughing and enjoying each other's company. When brunch concluded the girls went outside and Michele and his father retired to the back porch with coffee.

"She's a very pretty woman, son," Nicola noted, referring to Kara. "Quite intelligent and charming, as well. And her Italian is exceptional."

"She took part of an immersive study program with native Italian speakers in Japan. It gave her a strong command of the colloquial form of the language," Michele stated and Nicola nodded.

The dichotomy of this moment was not lost on Michele. The man sitting in front of him retired holding the third highest rank in the Aeronautica Militare and the position of chief of the Combat Forces Command, in charge of Italy's fixed-wing combat aircraft inventory. He held the highest of security clearances and been trusted with NATO's most closely held information. Yet his own son needed to lie to him about two girls because the senior staff at the SWA decided that his father didn't have a "need to know".

And the thought his father likely knew of his lack of veracity burned

him even more. Even the knowledge his father understood the need for OPSEC – Operational Security – did little to assuage his guilt. He knew his father did not fully approve of the idea of his son dating a woman fifteen years his junior, especially when she would eventually be leaving for home on the other side of the world. That he seemed so nonchalant about it struck Michele as a sign his father knew their true relationship involved something different, even if he chose to publicly play along.

“When does she head back to Japan?” he asked.

“Her student visa is good through the end of the year at which point she will decide whether or not to renew it or return to Japan and complete her studies there. I figure we’ll play it by ear when that time comes,” Michele replied.

“Take care of yourself, son. Don’t be a stranger and feel free to bring Kara with you. Claes too,” Arianna said that afternoon as Michele and the girls made their goodbyes. She handed Michele a huge basket of brunch items for them to enjoy for dinner that evening and for breakfast on Easter Monday. They waved goodbye and headed for the A1 Autostrade and Rome, 530km distant.

“I think I am going to pop,” Kara noted, leaning back in her seat with her hands clasped over her stomach. Claes, who only a few months ago often subsisted on a bowl of plain yogurt for breakfast, laid across both seats in the back, propping her head against a makeshift pillow formed from Michele’s folded blazer.

“How you doing back there, Claes?” Michele asked. He received a muffled groan in reply so he lowered the temperature on the climate control a few more degrees to help them both feel more comfortable.

Fortunately for both Kara and Claes the DB9’s smooth ride coupled with the quality of the road meant both girls could sleep off their meals and by the time they reached Bologna 200km later, they felt much better and by Florence another 100km on were ready to exit and stretch their legs a bit.

“If you want to rest, I can take over,” Kara offered. Michele nodded and moved to the passenger seat, forcing Claes to move behind the driver’s seat as Michele needed the seat set all the way back for

legroom.

Easter Sunday traffic remained light all the way to the capital, though Kara's stomach didn't feel up to swishing through the bends so she kept the cruise control at an even 100km/h and stuck mostly to the right lane. However, on the ruler-straight 10km section between the SS73 interchange at Bettolle and the Montepulciano rest area Michele let her do a full-throttle run, covering the distance in two minutes – and burning some ten liters of fuel. The tank still contained enough to make Rome and they pulled into the SWA compound in the early evening.

They unpacked their clothes and then gathered in the kitchen area. Most of the *fratelli* and staff were out for the holiday weekend, so the three of them prepared a light meal by wrapping warmed ham slices in crepe wedges with some fruit and potatoes and asparagus. Afterwards, the girls decided to get to take baths and go to sleep early and Michele headed to his Rome apartment.

Chapter Eight – Stainless Starlight

At the knock on the doorjamb, Michele and Hilshire looked up from their desks to see an attractive young woman with long black hair holding a manila folder.

“Do you have a moment, TC?” she asked. TC was shorthand for *Tenente Colonnello*, Michele’s rank in the Aeronautica Militare.

“Always, Marina,” Michele said.

Marina Cassini walked into the room. Two years out of the Polytechnic University of Turin with a degree in computer science and an interest in forensic science, her natural beauty enticed men in equal parts to her high intelligence scaring them. Considered the second-best computer security hacker in the SWA and head of the computer forensics team for Special Operations, she’d taught Kara everything the latter knew about anti-cyberterrorism and anti-cybercrime.

“I dumpster-dived into the HDD on the laptop Kara recovered during the Finocchio op and discovered some interesting information. Looks like there is a country farmhouse in Formello where the PRF have been stocking arms,” she noted, handing the manila folder over.

Michele knew Formello was an agricultural municipality composed of about a dozen villages a few kilometers northwest of the center of Rome. As he looked through the folder, he found inventories of weapons and explosives along with shipment schedules. The actual destinations and personnel looked to be in some type of code, but maybe Public Safety could cross-reference their own data. He’d have to ask Director Lorenzo for permission to bring it to Director Reschiglian.

“Fantastic work, Marina,” Michele said.

“I expect *vitello tonnato* and *bagna càuda* this weekend,” she replied, referring to two dishes the Region of Piedmont was known for.

“Deal,” Michele said. He rose and grabbed his jacket, motioning Marina to follow and they made their way towards Director Lorenzo’s office.

"You believe the PRF may be planning additional strikes?" Director Lorenzo asked Michele and Marina. Both shrugged their shoulders.

"That's not helpful," Jean growled.

"The list shows explosives, assault rifles, ammunition, and other military supplies which all certainly support such an assertion," Marina stated.

"Maybe somebody is following in the footsteps of Colonel Garnier and Lieutenant Abado?" Michele asked. The previous Spring, members of the Carabinieri's 1st Parachute Regiment under the command of those two officers helped smuggle weapons from Termoli on the Italian coast through the cities of Campobasso and Isernia and into Lazio Region. Rico killed Garnier during a performance of the opera Tosca at the Rome Opera House and Giuseppe, who'd served with Abado at one time, arrested him in a sting at a local *trattoria*.

"I'll have Priscilla check with her contacts in the Guardia di Finanza," Marina offered.

"I thought we'd eliminated those *ratti*," Jean stated in disgust. As a former Carabinieri himself, he'd taken the actions of those troops as a personal insult and the thought of it starting again made his stomach roil.

"We know the team in the safe house we took down on the 9th imported their explosives," Michele stated. "The info Kara and Claes recovered show they planned to drop the Viale dello Scalo San Lorenzo overpass just south of Termini Station around 03:00 in order to prevent trains from reaching the station and providing enough advance warning to commuters so they would switch to cars and snarl the roads around Rome."

"So why import explosives if the PRF already have a cache in place?" Lorenzo asked.

"Perhaps they were part of a different cell?" Mariana offered.

"Then why would they have this information?" Jean asked.

"Good point," Mariana noted.

"They'd planned to drop the span on Thursday the 13th. With Easter that weekend, losing Termini Station would have really messed up a number of people's holiday plans..." Michele noted. He smacked his head with the palm of his hand. "Of course! What's next Tuesday?" he asked, rhetorically.

"The 25th," Jean replied, then it struck him as well. "Liberation Day!"

A national holiday, April 25th designated the day the Italian resistance movement under the banner of the *Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale* formally liberated the cities of Milan and Torino from German occupation after liberating Bologna, Parma and Reggio Emilia in the days prior. These successes led to the capture and execution of Benito Mussolini and the surrender of all remaining German forces on Italian soil within days.

"The group Kara and Claes eliminated specialized in attacks that brought down structures," Michele noted. "Is it possible they were providing guidance to a group planning wider attacks against government facilities and installations on Liberation Day?"

"Considering the list of materials they are storing, they could be planning actually taking over the structures," Jean suggested.

"Whatever it is for, we can't take the chance that they successfully disburse it. I'll contact Minister Petris, but I will assume she'll agree so start preparing a mission," Lorenzo ordered Jean.

The following day a 17-seat Fiat Ducato minibus rumbled along the A90 Autostrada, a Ford Transit Connect communications van trailing behind. Due to the large windows on the Ducato, anyone looking in would see over a dozen people in Crye Associates MultiCam multi-environment camouflage patterned uniforms. Therefore, the real weapons were loaded into the Transit Connect and the girls and their handlers carried Airsoft versions of their real weapons with them on the bus. Some magnetic decals proclaimed them as the "Airsoft Club di Formello".

The vehicles exited onto State Highway 2 and continued to Monte Massaruccio, where they moved onto side roads. Their target property lay nestled amongst 50 hectares of agricultural land. Active cultivation took place on about half of that while the other half lay fallow. Seven

outbuildings surrounded the main house, including a large stable, sheds for tools, garages for agricultural machinery and a well.

Because of the large tracts of land surrounding the buildings, the team dismounted almost a kilometer away and proceeded on foot. Amadeo prepped an RQ-11 Raven UAV and launched it into the air to begin surveying the site from around 300m in altitude. The UAV picked up no movement either in optical or near infrared.

In the garret at the top of the house, a man in a military uniform looked through the scope of a PGM 338 sniper rifle, watching a girl and man sprint across the field to a stone outbuilding as they approached the main house. He'd heard the drone of the UAV and used a military digital radio to warn his comrades. All of them were dressed in uniforms whose fabric incorporated near-infrared signature management technology which helped them appear at the same radiation level as the surrounding terrain, making them more difficult to detect with NIR sensors.

The low sun masked their initial approach, but as they closed it highlighted their presence, drawing his attention to them. He shifted his view and saw another team skulking along the stone wall, keeping low. He decided he had a better angle at the other two and shifted back.

He knew the area well and only one real approach path existed so he settled his site in that area, waiting for them to emerge. He also knew he could likely not engage both targets before one could escape, so his goal became to drop the girl with a shot that would not be immediately lethal, hoping the man's instincts would force him to stop, allowing him to kill him and then finish off the girl.

One of his targets being a girl should have caused him some confusion, however he'd heard rumors of young children being used by the government to carry out covert actions. On the surface it sounded like something dreamed up in a Hollywood action film, but he also knew the saying "life imitated art". Young or old, he treated them all the same – as targets.

The two appeared again and he aimed for the lower part of the girl. She was halfway across when he pulled the trigger, the .338 Lapua Magnum round lancing out to strike her.

Michele heard the shot and saw Rico's left leg collapse, causing her to sprawl forward, her SG 551 flying out of her hands.

"Sniper!" Giuse's voice rang out over Michele's earpiece. Michele reached down and grabbed Rico by the back of her chest rig harness, spinning like a top and tossing her behind a stone wall, knocking the wind out of her as she landed in a heap on the soft grass.

That move saved his life, the second sniper bullet intersecting the space where Michele would have been had he continued forward and impacting the ground in a puff of dirt.

Cursing, the sniper cycled the bolt to load another round and lined-up on Michele's head as the latter started sprinting the few meters to the rock wall. He pulled the trigger and heard the unsatisfying sound of the hammer hitting the bullet yet not firing it. The sniper cycled the bolt yet again to clear the misfire, however by then Michele tucked into a ball and rolled behind the wall and out of sight.

Victor identified the sniper's nest and Triela opened up with her M82A1, sending eight .50 BMG anti-material projectiles into the garret, shredding both it and the sniper.

"The sniper has been neutralized," Victor's voice came over the radio. "We don't see others."

"Acknowledged," Michele replied. *It would have been nice to have seen that one*, he added in his head.

"Can you move your leg?" he asked Rico.

"It's very stiff, Michele," she replied. Michele nodded and placed her left leg across his own. In the fading sunlight he could see a dark splotch and he ran his hand along the underside of her leg in the same area, but felt no wetness.

"It looks like the round didn't exit," he noted. He used his knife to cut a slit across the splotch and ripped back the fabric to get a better view. He could see an entry hole and a good bit of blood. He removed a small medical kit from a pouch and popped it open, removing a swab pre-soaked in alcohol.

"This is going to hurt," Michele noted.

"No, it doesn't," Rico replied, misinterpreting Michele's statement for a question. Michele marveled at the cyborg's ability to shrug off pain. He used the swab to clean the wound and then removed a large compress coated on the inside with a mixture of antibiotics and coagulants. He pressed it against the wound and applied six strips of adhesive medical tape to hold it in place.

"Sorry, Rico, but you're on the bench for this one," he noted. Rico's face fell at the news, but she nodded her head in acceptance. He keyed his radio. "Rico's taken an indeterminate round in the leg. I've dressed the wound, however she is combat ineffective," he reported. A moment later Claes and Kara appeared, the latter carrying Rico's SIG.

"Understood," Jean's voice replied. "Does she require evacuation?"

"That's a negative, I'd like her to secure this position if possible," Michele said.

"Very well."

Michele handed Rico her rifle. "I'm counting on you to watch our backs," he said.

"Yes, Michele!" she chirped, her countenance brightening now that she could be part of the mission again.

"Good girl," Michele said, kissing the top of her head. "Let's go you two," he ordered and headed out, Claes and Kara in tow. They crossed along a line of trees, using them to shield them, coming to the back of the ground floor of one of the outbuildings.

"Suzuka is in position," Michele called.

Giuse, Alessandro, Henrietta and Petrushka arrived at the back of a warehouse/storage area attached to the main house.

"Cataluña is in position," Giuse said.

"Estoril is in position," Yarrow said as he and Gattonero took position in back of the main building, which had them facing the front of the

warehouse. They could see an Iveco Eurocargo-II medium-duty truck parked in front of one of the two main warehouse doors.

"Cataluña, be advised there is a delivery truck parked at the front of your building," Yarrow added.

"Roger that," Giuse replied.

"All units, cleared to enter," Jean ordered.

Yarrow nodded to Gattonero, who slammed her boot into the back door, shattering it inwards. She rushed in and immediately went into the room to the right while Yarrow hung a left.

Gattonero and Yarrow both called out "clear" over the team channel and proceeded into the foyer where they branched off into front rooms.

"Check the basement," Yarrow ordered. Gattonero stormed down the stairs and returned a few moments later, shaking her head.

"Estoril has secured the first floor," Yarrow reported.

At the outbuilding, Claes kicked in the door and rushed in, followed by Kara. Both quickly looked through the living area, two bedrooms and single bathroom. The rooms were dilapidated and showed years of disuse. They reorganized in the hall and continued down to where it branched right. Claes carefully peeked around the corner and saw two doors on the left with another door with a steel slit at the end of the hall where the hall branched right.

Claes took the first door on the left while Kara went forward and took the door farther down as Michele stood partially in the hall.

Without warning, a stream of automatic weapons fire arced out of the slit towards them. A dozen rounds impacted around Michele, five of them stitching his torso in a diagonal line tracing from his gut to his shoulder. He fell back against the wall before sliding down, unconscious.

"*Otoosan!*" Kara cried. Her training overrode her instinct to rush to him as she remembered Michele's admonition to never be so reckless at coming to the assistance of a wounded comrade that you yourself also become wounded and need assistance. Instead, she stuck her rifle out the door and emptied her magazine in a fusillade to provide cover as Claes ran into the hall, firing her own weapon behind her as she did so, and grabbed Michele, pulling him back around the corner and into the entrance hall. Claes checked his pulse and received a definite, it erratic, response. She heard a gurgle in his breathing and assumed one or both of his lungs had been penetrated.

Kara yanked a concussion grenade off her belt and lobbed it down the hall where it rolled up against the door. When the shockwave of the explosion passed, she exited the room and skipped backwards down the hall, firing her weapon in short bursts until clear of the line of fire.

"Michele's been hit, but he's still with us," Claes called over the tactical radio. "We're egressing the area." Kara handed Claes her rifle and hoisted Michele onto her shoulders in a fireman's carry. Claes stuck the XM8 around the corner and emptied the magazine as Kara and her rushed down the hall and out the building. She made her way back to Rico's position, gently lowering the unconscious Michele next to Rico.

"What happened?" Rico asked.

"He's been shot. Watch over him until Licia arrives," Kara said, referring to the medic that accompanied them on missions. Rico nodded and scooted up against his unconscious form to protect him from further harm.

Along the back of the warehouse, Henrietta hoisted a large plastic ellipse filled with water and attached it to the stone wall with strong self-adhesive patches. She then connected a detonator and everyone stepped back so Giuse could trigger the device.

Still under development by the UK's Alford Technologies, the device used six loops of detonating cord as a shaped charge to blow an opening in a wall. By tamping the explosion with water, it focused more of it forward to increase the breaching power while reducing the danger to the forces both outside and inside the wall, making it ideal for hostage-rescue situations.

Giuse triggered the explosive and a huge burst of water vapor and stone dust erupted from the wall. As soon as it cleared, a man-sized hole remained and Henrietta jumped in, her FN P90 at the ready. Petrushka came in right behind her, followed by Giuse and Alessandro.

Before them lay stacks of wooden crates of different sizes arranged in multiple rows. Henrietta and Petrushka ran forward between the crates, turning around to scan the upper floor to see a meter-high wood-frame railing stacked with bags of grain. Petrushka shifted her gaze forward while Henrietta continued to watch the upper level as she walked backwards along her row.

Below the upper floor, Giuse and Alessandro stood with their pistols drawn and aimed upwards. As Petrushka and Henrietta approached the opposite end of the warehouse, Giuse and Alessandro moved forward to join them.

In the floor above, a man watched the two girls continue forward, waiting for the men to appear from behind a stack of grain sacks. His partner crouched behind a tall wooden shelf of canned food items, watching the entry door should they try to enter that way.

They'd watched the approach of the four through the upper floor windows, but they had not expected them to breach the wall, instead trying to come through the upper door or via the open forward loading door and they'd positioned themselves accordingly. As the girls passed three-quarters distance, he saw the two men appear and walk forward, glancing around and back up at the upper deck as they did. When they reached half-distance he saw the one closest to him start to relax and he slowly pushed the barrel of his AR70/90 forward and took aim. He turned and used a blue LED flashlight to signal his partner that he could move forward to his own position facing into the warehouse.

As she made her way back towards Alessandro, Petrushka noticed the blue light in the upper level. While the cyborg's eyes did not have the "zoom" feature of the fictional Steve Austin, they were created from the absolute finest optics and their visual acuity in meters measured 6/3 compared to the 6/6 considered "normal" vision. This allowed her to see the barrel of the gun tracking towards her handler and she rushed forward, yelling "gun" and raising her Spectre submachine gun, sending a burst of fire upwards.

The man tracking Alessandro set the selector switch on his rifle to single-shot and placed the iron sights at the junction of the neck and shoulder. He heard the taller girl yell something and move towards him, but he ignored her and concentrated on the three-quarter profile. He heard automatic weapons' fire and heard the bullets slam into the grain sacks, kicking up dust. While his neocortex wanted to continue the track, his R-complex wanted to duck against the incoming rounds and his limbic system cast the tie-breaker in favor of the R-complex. He therefore twitched violently as he pulled the trigger, deflecting the bullet's path and instead of slamming into Alessandro's spine and killing him, the armor-piercing bullet impacted across the back of his ballistic vest above his trapezius muscle. It easily passed through the outer fibers and impacted against the harder plates beneath. Due to the shallow angle, the round actually skipped across the plate instead of penetrating, exiting back out through the fibers and burying itself in a crate.

Feeling like someone shoved him hard in the shoulder, Alessandro stumbled forward, barking his shin on a low crate and awkwardly falling forward, twisting his ankle as he did so. Petrushka arrived and hauled him back behind a tall stack of crates.

"Mr. Sandro! Are you hurt?" she asked.

"I don't think so," Alessandro replied. He moved his shoulder and while he felt a slight pain, it did not feel serious. He tried to stand on his ankle and the pain dropped him to a knee.

Henrietta sprayed her magazine into the upper floor, the 5.7x28mm rounds from her P90 penetrating farther than the 9mm rounds from the handler's pistols and Petra's SMG, but still of limited effectiveness.

"Shoot out the lights," Giuse ordered Petra and both of them fired at the fixtures directly above them, plunging their area into darkness and making it extremely difficult to target them.

"We can't hit them from here," Giuse noted. "Henrietta, we're going to provide covering fire for you to egress and climb up those stairs we saw to the right of the building."

"Yes, Giuse."

"On my mark...three...two...one...go!"

The two handlers and Petra emptied their magazines into the upper floor as Henrietta sprinted along the walls, using shadow and crates to mask her movements.

When Henrietta jumped through the hole, the three others dropped back and re-loaded, counting to five before popping back up and firing again. This covered the noise of Henrietta mounting the stairs to the top of the door. She braced herself and kicked open the door, pushing past a stack of boxes and lining up the nearest shooter, putting six rounds in his back.

She continued on, bent low, trying to find the other shooter. She heard a noise and whirled to face him, about a meter away. She pulled the trigger, but her magazine was empty and she heard the bolt dry-cycle. Normally the girls counted their rounds to know where they stood, but she'd been focused on Giuse's safety and lost count.

Her opponent smiled instead of fired, which cost him his life. In a flash, she moved inside the barrel of his rifle, knocking it out of his hand with her left arm. She then smashed into his chin with her right, crushing his jaw. She swept his right leg out from under him and as he fell backward she grabbed his skull and violently twisted it, dislocating his vertebrae and killing him.

"Clear!" she called out.

"Cataluña is secure," Giuse reported.

Gattonero stormed up the stairs of the main house towards the second floor foyer. There were four doors off the foyer and Yarrow went forward into the first room while Gattonero took the door to the right.

She walked into a large dark room and swiftly moved the flashlight attached to her HK MP7A1 around the room, discovering four doors – one at each corner. The one closest to her was partially open, the room behind dimly lit by sunlight through a single grimy window. She peeked inside and saw a musty room with covered furniture, boxes and crates strewn about. She stepped back out into the main room and found the switch for the overhead lights. She turned them on, deciding to start at the back and work forward so she moved towards the closed door on the opposite corner.

She heard the floorboard give way and flashes of light illuminate the wall in front of her as a force slammed into her from behind, knocking her on the ground. At almost the same moment she heard the roar of an automatic weapon firing and she made the connection that she'd just been shot.

Outside the room, Yarrow heard the sound and saw the flash of a weapon firing. He appeared in the door and saw a tall figure with an assault rifle. He raised his HK UCP pistol and fired four rounds in quick succession into the chest and head area, dropping the figure. Yarrow stepped into the room and discovered Gattonero lying face-down on the floor near the far door. He went over to her and saw a dark splotch on her back.

"Gattonero? Can you hear me Gattonero?" Yarrow said. He felt Gattonero stir beneath him and he helped her into a sitting position.

"Hurts," she said, softly.

"Can you stand?" Yarrow asked and Gattonero nodded. He helped her up and while she wobbled a bit unsteadily, she could stand. He undid her chest rig harness and then ripped open the front of her uniform jacket to get her out of it. He identified three holes in the uniform t-shirt on her back, all of them weeping blood. He draped the shirt over her back, loosely tying the arms around her neck.

"Race control, this is Estoril. We have one casualty on the second floor and are extricating," Yarrow reported. He then lifted Gattonero up and started back down the stairs.

"Acknowledged," Jean said. He turned to Hilshire and Triela. "Take over."

Triela and Hilshire passed Yarrow and Gattonero on their way out and entered the building, slowly and carefully climbing the stairs to the third floor foyer. The room layout was similar to the second floor and they didn't find anyone. They climbed the final steps into the Garret where they came across the bloody remains of the sniper and two empty loft areas. They found a Beretta SC70/90 and assumed that the sniper would have swapped his PGM for it to defend the third floor.

"Estoril has cleared the main house. No threats and no prizes," Hilshire reported.

"Well that was a bust," Triela spat.

"This was just a diversion to give their peers extra time to do whatever they're doing. Hopefully the other teams are screwing that up," Hilshire noted and the three started back down the stairs.

Behind the rock wall, Kara and Claes inventoried their ammunition and reloaded. Kara took Michele's SPAS 15 combat shotgun and spare magazine, both of which she handed to Claes.

"Let's finish this," she growled and Claes nodded. Instead of going in the same way they had, they went underneath an external staircase to the second floor and approached a door set into a small alcove and opposite from the position they had taken fire from.

Kara set a breaching charge on the door and they vacated the alcove, hiding behind a structural wall. Kara activated the charge and the door exploded inward in a shower of splinters and stone chips. Claes charged directly in and took aim at the far wall near where it ended in an opening into the hall.

They continued forward and pulled-up just before the wall. Inside the magazine of the SPAS 15 were special shells that contained a number of machined tungsten and titanium darts held in position by a plastic sabot. When fired, the shell peeling away would cause the sabot structure to fail and allow the penetrators to continue on to their target. It was a short-ranged weapon (optimized for 50m or less), but it could penetrate all known personal body armor as well as almost 8mm of mild steel.

Claes threw herself around the corner, staying as low as possible. She pulled the trigger six times in quick succession, laying down a pattern along the door at about waist-level for a man. No return fire came and Claes rose to one knee, ejecting the magazine and slamming home a new one. The doors showed the effects of the concussion grenade, buckled inward where they met. Kara came around the corner and both went up against the door. Kara poked the barrel of her XM8 into the gap between the doors, searching for any targets. She saw nothing and stepped back, bashing the doors open with her shoulder.

Inside the room two vaguely-human forms in uniforms were on the floor, their guts shredded by the penetrators. Beyond, a set of closed metal doors faced them, their surface pitted with the impact of the penetrators.

Claes ejected the magazine from the SAS 15 and replaced the top flechette round with a breaching round before re-inserting it. She aimed it at the lock between the two doors and fired, the round blowing the two doors apart. Kara rushed in, rifle at the ready, and found herself in a large garage area. Before her were a number of small cars and the sound of a door slamming and a diesel engine clattering to life drew her attention to a Fiat Ducato transport van at the far bay. The garage door started to roll up and Kara raised her weapon and advanced.

A spray of semi-automatic pistol fire from the driver's area pinned Kara down behind a hatchback. She saw Claes loop around to the front and put four rounds from the SAS 15 into the cab, hitting both the driver and his passenger. The darts hit the driver as he shifted from Reverse into Neutral and his arm jerked, putting the transmission back into Reverse as he stabbed the accelerator, sending the van to smash against the concrete back wall, the wheels spinning on the smooth concrete floor, generating clouds of thick, acrid smoke that cloaked everything and reduced visibility to nothing. A titanic boom ripped through the garage as one of the tires exploded.

Kara and Claes advanced forward, pistols drawn. Kara ran into the side of the van and moved forward, opening the driver's side door and physically ripped him out of the seat and seatbelt and onto the floor. The engine immediately went to idle and Kara raised her pistol and put a round through the passenger's left temple before reaching in and killed the ignition. She turned on the cabin lights and climbed onto one knee in the driver's seat to look through the window into the back, seeing a collection of wooden crates.

She put the transmission into neutral and with Claes' help they pushed the van forward to where they could open the rear doors. Kara opened a crate and discovered a cache of Beretta SC70/90 carbines. She opened a smaller crate and found boxes of 5.56x45mm NATO ammunition and empty 30 round STANAG magazines.

"I've got what looks like plastic explosive," Claes noted, pointing to blocks wrapped in black plastic with lettering that included "T-4" - the Italian military version of the explosive known as RDX.

"Looks like the intel we collected was accurate," Kara noted. She activated the radio and called in the discovery to Jean.

"There is some serious weapons' and explosive smuggling taking place here," Alessandro noted as he leaned against one of the crates, favoring his other ankle. The other three walked along the crates, occasionally prying one open to verify the contents. They'd just heard Kara's report from the garage, a short distance down the hall from the warehouse.

"Looks like we interrupted them trying to move the product," Alessandro noted, pointing to the partially-filled back of the Eurocargo-II, a small Hyster forklift parked next to it. Giuse nodded and reported the details.

The deep *whup-whup-whup* of a helicopter's blades echoed between the various outbuildings as Kara and Claes stood to the side of the main house with Michele, who remained unconscious and laid out on a tarp. Gattonero and Rico both sat on a low wooden crate dragged over from the garage.

"It looks like he was hit with armor-piercing rounds," Licia said into a cellular phone. "His ballistic vest contained most of it, but transmitted significant impact energy. I think his ribcage is broken and he appears to be bleeding into at least one lung. Gattonero took much the same to the back and Rico has a bullet in her leg...okay...yes I hear the chopper now...understood."

She hung up the phone and turned to watch as an Agusta-Bell AB212AM from the Aeronautica Militare's 81st Search and Rescue Training Center at Pratica di Mare air base flew in just over the trees and settled down on the expansive front lawn. Two medical technicians rushed out carrying litters and Kara and Claes moved Michele to one while Yarrow ordered Gattonero to lie down on the other. One of the technicians picked up Rico and carried her over. They loaded all three injured aboard and Licia followed. The pilot applied power and the chopper lifted into air and headed for the SWA compound.

Chapter Nine – Reflections

The digital clock in the dashboard clicked over to 22:18 when the minivan came to a stop in front of the cyborg dorm. Kara trudged up the stairs to her room and changed out of her combat uniform into a t-shirt and gym shorts and went to the shower room to clean-up before heading over to the hospital to try and see Michele.

When she arrived, the nurse she had chased away back when Angelica had been brought in from the car bombing was on duty and Kara found her presence still intimidated the woman enough to allow her to find out Michele's room.

As she approached, she saw Claes standing next to the window, looking out. She also had changed, though she wore a sweater, skirt and boots and Kara felt a bit self-conscious in her t-shirt, sweat pants and sneakers.

"Is he awake?" Kara asked.

"I haven't gone in yet," Claes admitted. Kara nodded and knocked once before carefully opening the door. Michele, sitting up and reading a book, turned towards them.

"I thought Visiting Hours were over," he said.

"I used my natural charms," Kara replied with a smile, earning her a grunt from Michele.

"That you two are not dressed in black must mean they expect me to live," he noted with a wry smile. Kara, however, answered with a scowl.

"That's not funny," she said. "I heard you were really injured."

"My torso looks like it's been hit with a sledgehammer. Those bullets left some magnificent bruises both on the skin and my internal organs. Bianchi said it would at least be a week before I should be out of bed, much less back on duty. I imagine he's being facetious about the former, though I think he is likely not about the latter. So I'll likely need to pawn you two off with Victor or Giuse."

"Anyone but Jean," Kara replied.

"I heard you and Kara acquitted yourselves well after I forgot to duck," Michele replied, choosing to ignore her request.

"It appears to have been a major weapons cache," Claes noted.

"You did well, Claes. You and Kara, both. I'm proud of you two. It's getting late, so you two should head to bed."

"Then move over," Kara ordered.

"I don't think this hospital bed's not big enough for the three of us."

"Who said anything about three?" Kara replied with a grin.

"I'll be going now," Claes stated and left.

Thirty minutes later, Michele looked down on Kara as she slept in the chair, her head resting on his hospital bed and her face twitching as she dreamed. He slowly ran his hand through her hair, his mind's eye receding to his first few weeks with her. In her initial physical training, Kara learned the limits of her artificial body – and also learned that those limits were few. Running five kilometers without exhaustion. Sprinting one hundred meters in just over ten seconds. Leaping a hole nine meters in diameter. Lifting two hundred kilograms of free weights. And performing literally hundreds each of sit-ups, chin-ups and push-ups. Michele knew the cyborgs were good, but seeing first-hand just *how* good they were amazed him.

Over time and a number of missions, Michele came to understand that the girls employed strategies that came from a different idea of what could be considered "an acceptable loss". To Kara, the possibility of losing a limb to successfully carry out a mission didn't matter to her, since she could have a replacement fitted. Michele, on the other hand, didn't have that luxury. So while he might try and block a gunshot with his forearm out of instinct, Kara would do so as a tactic. She knew her body could tolerate damage far beyond what her original human body could, and she played that fact to her advantage. Some thought the cyborgs acted this way through a belief they did not know fear, but Michele knew better. Kara did not fear death, in part because she felt she could not be killed and in part because she would allow

herself to be if that is what it took to keep him safe. Because he knew that she did fear him not being safe.

Having both Kara and Claes under his supervision offered Michele a chance to see how the two different types of conditioning regimens and decisions compared. While Series One and Series Two cyborgs underwent effectively identical forms of general conditioning, Kara retained a good portion of her memories prior to being converted while Claes retained almost none. This decision was not driven specifically by the conditioning: Angelica and Rico both retained much of their memories prior to conversion while Petrushka did not, though in her case that had been the result of an error. And yet with Triela and Henrietta, the decisions had evidently been deliberate, to spare them the remembrance of horror and trauma so gruesome that it might render them mad.

With Claes, Michele did not know if she remembered nothing of her prior life due to a conscious decision to deny her them or if it happened through an error occurring when they wiped her a second time after the death of Captain Raballo. Regardless of the reasons why, Michele sometimes wondered if the lack of a sense of "self" upon their waking up at the SWA played an impact how girls like Petrushka, Claes, Triela and Henrietta related to themselves, their co-workers and their handlers.

"So what was it like? Waking up a cyborg?" Michele had asked Kara one day early in their new relationship as handler and cyborg. Kara replied with a shrug.

"I just woke up, as if from a deep sleep with vibrant dreams. In those dreams I learned my name: Kara Michelle Pagani. The dreams told me you were my handler and adopted father and that I needed to obey your orders and instructions and those of the other handlers and staff members. And I knew things: how to speak Italian and other languages; how to move my limbs and use the proper amount of force to not crush things; how to fight hand-to-hand; and how to use various weapons and their statistics."

No longer a *tabula rasa*, in the intervening year Kara had developed her own distinct personality, drawing from what memories she had been allowed to retain from her previous life as Kumari Rosier and the experiences she'd gained in her new life as Kara Pagani. As she learned, loved, fought and lived, a new sense of "self" imprinted upon her brain, replacing the old one that the doctors buried deep.

And yet, the conditioning still wielded a subtle, but noticeable, hand over that personality. Like the two-headed Roman god Janus, Kara exhibited two faces: one a friendly, loving and gregarious teenaged girl and the other an emotionless soldier who dealt death with neither hesitation nor mercy in the blink of an eye. And she could switch between the two sides with frightening speed.

Michele knew Kara felt nothing for those she killed. They were only objects in the way, to be pushed aside with bullets, knives or bare hands so as to allow her to advance to the next one and push it aside, as well. He sometimes wondered if that was a good thing. The doctors said it protected them: that their young minds would have rebelled at the continuous taking of lives over the years, eventually turning them sociopathic or psychotic.

Michele had taken life, both before and after joining the SWA. He remembered the places, but not the faces, whether through subconscious action or the capriciousness of human memory. But he knew that he owed them the courtesy of acknowledging their existence, even if he then promptly robbed them of it. He felt obligated to at least acknowledge that they had been humans too, with loves and lives and desires and hopes. He felt neither guilt nor regret for doing so, for he knew that their deaths were necessary for the greater good.

Michele also knew that Kara's – indeed, all of the cyborg's – most powerful motivation focused on protecting their handler's from harm and that she took his present injury as a personal failure on her part to do so, despite his protestations to the contrary. Michele also detected a mild undercurrent of anger on Kara's part towards Claes for apparently not sharing her level of concern, even though Claes had pulled Michele out of the line of fire. He'd heard Giuse's tale of how Henrietta moved to kill a waiter early in her training when she mistakenly believed him a threat along with the rumors of Elsa de Sica almost breaking a waitresses' arm after she spilled a glass of water on her handler, Lauro.

Michele wondered if Kara ever looked at him with pity due to his slowness and his fragility. Without the vest, he'd now be dead – five high-velocity rifle rounds having torn his insides into something resembling what one would get from a tin of meat. Even with the vest, the bullets' impact energy inflicted mild myocardial contusion resulting in cardiac arrhythmia, which had lowered his blood pressure to the

point of inducing unconsciousness in addition to rupturing a lung and cracking his ribcage.

Kara twitched again and slowly came awake.

"Mmmm. That feels good," she purred. She moved farther forward so Michele could reach her upper back.

"Time for bed," he said ten minutes later.

"Uh-huh," she drawled, slowly moving into a sitting position and cutting loose with a large yawn and stretch. She leaned forward and kissed him on the forehead. "Love you," she said.

"Love you too. Sleep well."

As she walked back to her dorm, Kara's thoughts also focused on her life at the SWA. She knew that in a way she was an orphan. Her biological parents were dead (she did not know of the uncle on her mother's side who'd refused to accept her into his care after the bombing) which made her the last of her family line at the moment. She experienced a menstrual cycle, though she did not know if she could reproduce. Considering all the changes wreaked upon her body, remaining fertile struck her as something unnecessary and even unwelcome in a cyborg. However, it remained something she currently felt uncomfortable discussing with either Michele or the doctors, though she also accepted she likely should know sooner rather than later.

For whatever reason, a handler and cyborg were known as a "brother" (*fratello*) as opposed to "siblings" (*fratelli*). To her knowledge, all such pairings were a male handler with a female cyborg and the standard cover stories for them were a brother-sister relationship, so she assumed standard male chauvinism drove the naming convention. She sometimes wondered if another section contained female handlers and male cyborgs and they were called "sister" (*sorella*).

To Michele, however, Kara was his "daughter" (*figlia*), not his sister. Kara knew that in order to be able to bring her to Italy for the advanced medical treatment necessary to save her life, Michele needed to become her legal guardian and the easiest way to do that had been through adoption. Converted to a cyborg just after her seventeenth birthday, Michele also stated that a sister two decades his

junior would strike most people as something very unusual and could raise more questions than it answered so they would instead use as covers relationships like father-daughter and senior-junior. Even boyfriend and girlfriend, though she knew that such a role troubled Michele because of that age difference and the social implications it brought, even if there were no legal ones.

And yet, from the day she first opened her eyes until the day she last closed them, her body would defy both growth and decay. Ageless, yet not eternal. Chronologically eighteen, but physically forever seventeen, though clothing, makeup, cosmetic prosthetics and her Asian features could add close to a half-decade to her appearance. What Ponce de Leon could not do, SWA medical had – discover a “fountain of youth” and from it administered upon her an elixir that would keep her forever youthful in appearance.

So in another way, she was not an orphan, for she had an adopted father in Michele who cherished and loved her no less than what she expected her biological parents had. And she felt connected to not just Michele, but also to his family and her fellow cyborgs here at the Social Welfare Agency. And yet, for all that connection she felt, there were times when she felt alone and unconnected. When it came to her parents, she retained mostly impressions and feelings more than actual memories and images. The sound of their voices. The feel of the hands and arms as they held and hugged her. The warmth of their bodies as they lay together in bed as a family.

And she’d woken up with no memories of friends, neighbors, acquaintances or schoolmates. She did not know if the face in the mirror staring back at her now was the same face she’d had before her conversion. With no memory of them and they with possibly no idea of her present features, effectively all of the people she’d ever known were gone forever. She could pass her closest friend on the street – might have already done so – and neither would recognize the other.

Even if her facial features remained unchanged, she knew the chances of actually meeting someone she’d known in her prior life were remote. Her current life remained centered on the SWA compound. She studied and trained at the compound. Took her meals at the compound. Recreated at the compound. Slept at the compound. Her only friends now were her fellow cyborgs at the compound and the only adults in her life the handlers and staff at the compound. And she normally only left the compound when on a mission with Michele or another *fratello*.

Such thoughts, while rare, always made her feel moody and melancholy. Ilaria, having been on the receiving end of a few nasty tirades, learned to recognize when Kara felt this way and find somewhere else on the compound to be needed, though it only put Kara in a deeper funk because she then didn't have anyone to talk to about it. And she didn't wish to burden Michele with those feelings, she believing his life already complicated enough by her presence since his adoption of her.

What she didn't know (nor did most of the handlers and staff) was that Michele had in fact adopted her twice – once as Kumari Rosier and again as Kara Pagani. In order to bring her new existence into being, it proved necessary to end her old one and therefore Kumari “died” in a staged traffic accident on the way to the public SWA Medical Center from Ciampino Airport. In a small cemetery in a quiet suburb of Rome stood a marker over an empty grave, signifying the final resting place of one Kumari Deleroux Rosier-Pagani, aged 16.

Michele, supposedly wracked with grief with saving the girl from a terrorist bombing to only lose her in a traffic accident, then adopted Kara from the SWA hospital to honor Kumari's memory. When she'd awoken in his Rome apartment, Claes had noticed on the dresser a picture of a smiling Japanese girl in a black sweater, pink skirt, tan jacket and black boots on a pier in Yokohama, Japan - Kumari Deleroux Rosier, aged 15, recovered from the purse of her mother, Emiko Fushida, at Atocha train station in Madrid, Spain.

Chapter Ten – Temporary Duty

"What a disaster," Jean Croce said as he paced the briefing room the following morning. "Two cyborgs and two handlers wounded and a few more with their own close calls. When Draghi and Section One finds out they're going to have a field day. First Venice, now this."

"It wasn't that bad," his younger brother noted. "Rico and Ilaria will be up within a day or two."

"What's the big deal?" Alessandro asked. "We captured a huge arms and explosives cache. That should be earning us brownie points, not costing us them."

Jean glared at Alessandro. "The fact is we took serious casualties in what should have been a straight-forward mission, even against seasoned troops. Section One is still running the fingerprints we collected, but based on their dress and weapons, we believe they are *Esercito Italiano* regulars."

"We got our asses handed to us because they responded as a team and we didn't," Michele noted on the LCD display at the front of the room. A videoconference feed had been set up at the foot of his bed. "We tend to work as individuals, even when we're together," he continued. "Those guys trained as a team and they responded as one. That gave them the advantage over us."

"Whomever they were, they appear to have been adding to the cache when we hit them," Jean continued. "The truck was a one-way rental from Trieste so we think at least some of the weapons came from one of the units stationed in Friuli-Venezia Giulia. If they're following the same game plan as Laazari and Garnier did, they would be mixing weapons smuggled in from Central Europe into their general inventory and then out to local units of whom we assume are the Albanian mafia."

"We think the weapons may have originated in Nigeria or Morocco. The cache includes Beretta AR70/90s, M12s and 92s, H&K MP5s and Rheinmetall MG42/59s. The only operators of the Beretta AR70/90 other than ourselves are the Moroccans, Nigerians and Paraguayans," Ferro reported.

"Friuli-Venezia Giulia is quite far north for the Albanians," Priscilla noted. "They used to work heavily in Apulia with the Sacra Corona Unita until the GICO (*Gruppo di investigazione criminalità organizzata*) took down a number of their clans and many moved north to Molise. I'm surprised that they agreed to start a smuggling operation with Alessandro and Michele in Barletta," she added.

"A half-million Euro will assuage a great deal of worries," Alessandro replied.

"Still, they seem to work more in Lombardy, Piedmont and Tuscany," Priscilla noted. "Maybe they're working with the Russians?" she hypothesized.

"Section One is investigating," Jean replied, turning the conversation back to the after-action report. "They also have stationed people to observe the structure remotely, however we expect that the people we took down warned their comrades of our assault so we don't expect anyone to show up."

Under 48 hours later Hillshire, Triela, Claes and Kara parked by the side of the Via Cristo Re standing near a high stone wall surrounding a large private residence. The spit of land formed between the Venetian Lagoon and the Sile River running from Jesolo in the north to Padua in the south contained numerous private villas and palazzi on large acreages because the water depth here remained sufficient to prevent it from drying into the tidal mudflats and saltwater marshes that closed off the western end and prohibited direct travel by water down to Padua and Venice.

"We need to send someone over the fence and disable the door security," Hillshire noted.

"I'm on it," Kara replied. She stepped back ten meters and charged forward. She went into a forward flip, compacting her legs as she landed and using them as springs to launch herself up almost four meters. She flipped upside down at the peak of the jump, coming down hands-first on the top of the stone wall. She compressed her arms at the elbows and pushed off, back-flipping and landing on the other side on her feet in a flower garden, her athletic shoes sinking into the soft dirt and crushing a snapdragon underfoot.

She removed her pistol and carefully looked out over the garden, but saw nobody. She headed to the door and opened the security keypad. The system was good, but common, so she quickly disabled it and opened the door.

"*Entrez, mes amis,*" she welcomed like a *maitre'd* to a fine restaurant.

"Thank you, *mademoiselle,*" Hillshire stated as he patted Kara on the shoulder and nodded approvingly, something Triela did not miss as she stood behind him.

The villa spread across two floors and 800 square meters. A balcony encircled the entire second floor, with terraces in front of each bedroom and the main living room. On the ground floor, a huge terraced area enclosed a large swimming pool and whirlpool spa. Chaise longues of bronze cast aluminum with woven seats and backs ringed part of the pool area and wrought-iron chairs with plush cushions tucked under glass tables placed on stone and marble pedestals. A stone bench encircled a large stone fire-pit.

On one of the chaises lay the slumbering form of Nikolay Andreyevich Bushuyev. While performing her investigation, Mr. Bushuyev came to Priscilla's attention and the more she looked, the higher up the "interest list" he rose. Director Lorenzo made a decision for the expanded Hillshire *fratello* to pay Mr. Bushuyev a visit at his "summer residence" outside Venice.

Kara positioned herself to block the sun falling on his face and soon enough he came awake. She stepped back and Nikolay furiously blinked his eyes to counteract the sun's dazzle and then focused on Kara.

"Кто вы?"

"Меня зовут Кара, и у меня есть несколько вопросов."

"Sei italiano?" he asked, switching languages.

"Yes," Kara replied, also in Italian.

"Where are my guards?" Nikolay asked, sitting up.

"I expect getting their asses handed to them," Kara replied. As she spoke with Nikolay, Claes and Triela positioned themselves near the

two most likely exists for any security staff that by now knew intruders were on the grounds. One guard exited next to Claes and she put out her foot, tripping him. She then landed on his back and rendered him unconscious with a targeted blow to the side of the head.

Triela let the first guard pass, then used the map-case that held her shotgun to pole-axe the second guy in the stomach, causing him to fold over and allowing her to land a karate chop to knock him out. The first guard, hearing his companion grunt as the air left his lungs from the impact, turned just in time to be brained by her forearm and collapsing in a heap.

"Anyone else we should know about?" Kara asked as Nikolay gaped at how quickly the two girls incapacitated his well-trained security force. When he refused to reply, Kara nodded to Claes and Triela, both of whom entered the residence and started searching.

"What do you want?" Nikolay demanded, though the edge of fear in his voice ruined his attempt to show dominance towards her.

"As the lady noted, we have a few questions," Hillshire stated. "Specifically referring to some arms shipments run across the border from Slovenia into Trieste and the surrounding provinces of Friuli-Venezia Giulia."

"You dress like Cosa Nostra, but you look neither Italian nor Sicilian. And they do not operate this far north, anyway," Nikolay stated. "And you do not look European," he noted to Kara. "Are you Triad?" he asked, referring to the Chinese Triads which had recently begun operating in some of the northern cities.

"You don't need to know where we're from," Hillshire said. "Just answer our questions and we will be on our way."

"Ah, government," Nikolay said, nodding his head sagely. "The PRF have said you were running young girls against them, but I assumed it was the talk of those who imbibed too much *vino* over dinner. I also hear that your girls tend to leave bodies in their wake."

"If we wanted you dead, Nikolay Bushuyev, your lungs would be full of either your own blood or pool water by now," Hillshire said.

Claes and Triela returned from their search of the villa.

"We found a few domestic staff and a rather excitable young lady taking a shower in the master bedroom. We've locked them in the ground floor storage pantry for the moment," Triela replied.

Hillshire nodded and turned back towards the Russian. "So, Nikolay. The weapons."

"I am sorry, Mr. Government Man. I am a retired Russian businessman enjoying the warmer and drier climate Venice offers this time of year compared to back home in Moscow."

"Nikolay, we know you're part of the Русская мафия," Kara said. "We also know you are not directly involved with the weapons smuggling, though we know you helped introduce the people involved for a fee." She stepped forward and sat down on the chaise, pushing his legs over to make room.

"You've seen what my two friends did to your staff," she added, indicating Claes and Triela. "I have much the same abilities as they do. If you answer this gentleman's questions truthfully, we'll be on our way and leave you in peace. If you continue to chose to obfuscate, I may have to get a bit more...aggressive."

"You are a very pretty girl, Kapa, but you are also very young. And I once served in the спецназ, so I am trained to accept a not insignificant modicum of discomfort," he said with a smile.

Kara nodded and rose. She went to one of the folding recliners next to the pool and proceeded to twist and bend the aluminum tubes into a roughly knotted shape before heaving it ten meters across the terrace.

Nikolay turned to Hillshire. "You wish to know what, exactly?" he said with a large smile.

As late afternoon morphed into early evening, the puddles in the trachyte bricks and Istrian stone of the Piazzetta San Marco reflected the clearing sky above and the air felt fresh in the wake of the recent cleansing downpour.

Three female teens turned the corner of the Procuratie Nuove and onto the Piazzetta towards the Grand Canal. Triela strode in the lead, wearing a brown button-down distressed cotton shirt over denim jeans tucked into brown boots. Kara walked behind her, dressed in a white

scoop-neck tee, denim shorts, pink zip-front hoody and black boots, a raspberry lollipop in her mouth. To Kara's right, Claes showed her usual conservative side with a grey and white pull-over long-sleeve hoody, denim miniskirt and athletic shoes.

They walked along the Grand Canal and past the front of the Doge's Palace to the Hotel Danieli. The previous summer Triela, Petrushka and their handlers visited Venice to search for a number of senior PRF members and their financiers. They'd identified many at the restaurants and bars of the Hotel Danieli, considered one of the finer hotels in the city. Jean and Rico visited the city a number of weeks later, assassinating a wealthy financier of the PRF.

Hillshire therefore selected the Hotel Danieli to serve as their home base for the Bushuyev assignment and with that completed, the girls had been given the rest of the day off to explore the city. Rather than split up, they chose to stay together, visiting the various palaces, churches, and museums of the San Marco *sestieri*. Now they went to link-up with Hillshire for dinner at the Restaurant Terrazza Danieli overlooking the Venetian lagoon and the Isola di San Giorgio Maggiore.

The three showered and changed into evening wear and followed Hillshire up to the terrace level. The sky was muted shades of pink, yellow and orange, the clouds a grey-purple. Lit hurricane lamps at every table glowed cheerily and the freshly-pressed linens lazily moved in the gentle breeze.

As per their custom, the girls ate like proverbial horses, tearing through a selection of *Antipasto*, followed by the *Primo* and *Secondo*. Next came the *Formaggio e frutta* portion of the meal and finally dessert.

"I didn't know you spoke Russian, Kara," Hillshire remarked during the meal.

"'Speaking' implies fluency, which I certainly do not have," Kara replied. "However, when I met Nadia and Aleks in Geneva last May, I decided to try and learn a bit of Russian. I've been practicing with Petrushka."

"How many languages do you speak fluently?" Hillshire asked.

"Italian, French, Japanese and English. I'm okay with Spanish and German, though I tend to read and write both better than I speak. And my Russian is quite weak."

"Impressive. Triela is only fluent in Italian, German and French," Hillshire noted. He didn't make the statement to be condescending, but that is how Triela heard it and she flushed slightly in embarrassment.

"Anyway, your tactics proved successful in getting him to talk to us. I forwarded the data back to Priscilla and Olga to have them look into it deeper. Hopefully this will provide the break we need to determine how the weapons are getting into the country."

After dinner, the four retired to their respective two rooms. Triela, having first changed into her pajamas in the bathroom, silently hung her dress in the wardrobe and placed her dress sandals to the side. She remained upset at Hillshire for what she perceived was a public rebuke from her handler during dinner and therefore decided "the silent treatment" would be in order for the remainder of the evening.

Her handler removed his jacket and belt, standing beside her to hang both on a hangar.

"Did you enjoy your meal?" he asked her.

"Uh-huh," Triela grunted back.

"What did you three see today?"

"The usual; museums, palaces and plazas," Triela replied, clipping the words as she spoke them to minimize the amount of communication.

Hillshire nodded and headed into the bathroom to change and perform his hygienic routine. When he returned to the bedroom, he saw Triela buried under the covers. Their room had two double beds pushed together, though each had separate bed linens so they were effectively two separate beds.

He grabbed a robe from the wardrobe and stepped out onto the balcony. The lagoon and Grand Canal lay before him, the lights of the buildings reflecting off the water.

"You should come see this, Triela. It's beautiful," he noted.

"I'm going to bed," Triela replied, gruffly.

"Are you okay?" Hillshire asked. "You sound a bit out of sorts."

"I'll be fine," Triela said and rolled over to show him her back.

Chapter Eleven – R&R (Rest & Revelation)

Claes shifted position to allow the moving sun to fall on the book spread out in her lap. The trees that lined most of the concrete pathways of the Parco Solari in downtown Milan were farther back in this area which prevented it from being in direct shade. The temperature in direct sunlight felt warm enough to allow for a long-sleeve top over a t-shirt, shorts and sneakers.

As she shifted, she looked back over her shoulder towards Michele's apartment building. Shading her eyes from the sun, she saw him sitting on the terrace that wrapped around the corner of the building outside the master bedroom. She turned away before he could see her and watched families and couples walk along the paths and over the grassy areas, enjoying the weather. The noise from the light vehicular traffic this Saturday afternoon burbled like a manmade river and a soft breeze kept the air clear.

Friday morning Hillshire and the girls were preparing to return to Rome when Jean called and ordered Claes to take a train to Milan for Michele, against the suggestion of the medical staff, had announced he would be going to Milan and as Kara would be driving to Naples with Triela and Petrushka on Sunday, Claes drew the short straw. When she arrived at Milan's central station, she took the Metro to the Sant'Agostino station across Parco Solari from Michele's apartment.

The two of them picked up dinner at the local trattoria Tuesday evening and watched an exhibition soccer match on television. Claes enjoyed soccer as a sport, but didn't really feel any strong affiliation with a particular team. She claimed support for A.C. Roma, though only in the name of preventing roommate strife since Triela liked them very much.

While Claes had not relished the idea of being in Milan because it took her away from her books and garden, she did appreciate the fact that it would get her away from Kara. Ever since Michele's injury in the Formello operation, Kara had been pacing like a mother tiger who'd had her cubs taken from her, snapping at people and generally being a pain in the ass, in Claes' opinion. She also felt Kara had been giving her a hard time because she wasn't stricken with worry, so she hoped agreeing to go with him would project the illusion she cared and get Kara off her back. Claes knew Michele would recover given some time

to rest and she felt Kara pestering him every waking moment was not conducive to him resting.

The sun eventually sank behind the buildings and Claes closed the book and walked back across the street to Michele's apartment. As she climbed the steps onto the main floor, she could smell sausages and sweet peppers cooking. She slipped off her sneakers before walking into the large gourmet kitchen.

"I thought we'd try some home cooking, Neapolitan style," Michele noted from the grill, where he stirred a large cast iron pan filled with diced sweet red and yellow bell peppers, diced red onion and sliced pork sausages fresh from the butcher that morning. In the back, a large pot of water was on the boil.

"This will be *spaghetti con sugo di peperoni*," Michele stated. He motioned for Claes to hand him a packet of spaghetti sourced from his favorite pasta shop. He then turned to a second grill on the other side of the kitchen and uncovered a plate with four sandwich squares covered in an egg batter and started heating another iron skillet.

Claes leaned over and lifted one of the bread slices to see a thick slice of cheese.

"*Mozzarella in carozza*," Michele replied. Claes nodded, wiping her fingers clean on a rag.

Michele checked that the pasta was boiling and gave the sausages and peppers a quick stir, adding in some more red wine. He then placed two of the mozzarella sandwiches in the pan with some olive oil and butter, grilling them to a golden brown on each side and setting them on a plate covered in paper towels.

"Can you do the other two for me, please?" Michele said. Claes nodded and took over while Michele turned off the heat under both the sauce and the pasta. He lifted the pot with the pasta and drained out the water in one of two sinks. He then placed it on a wooden block surface and poured in the contents of the saucepan, using tongs to thoroughly mix the ingredients. Claes finished the second set of sandwiches and moved them to the towel, placing the pan under water to cool. Michele plated their meals and added the pan to the sink and Claes washed both.

Claes took both plates out to a table set for dinner on the balcony in front of the living room and Michele followed with a bottle of Il Poggione Brunello di Montalcino Riserva 1999 and two wine goblets. He poured a ration into each and then used a fireplace lighter to light a hurricane lamp in the center of the table as well as tealight candles in a number of black steel and glass lanterns arranged around the balcony.

Claes quickly cleared her plate and went back inside for seconds while Michele re-filled their glasses. When they both finished, Michele took the plates and cutlery with him and placed them in the dishwasher. He then removed two *panna cotta* from the refrigerator and drizzled a blackberry sauce over it. He also prepared two café mochas and took them out on a tray.

Claes moved her chair to look out over the balcony, resting her bare feet on the edge as she consumed her dessert and drank her mocha.

"Why did you join the SWA, Michele?" Claes asked.

"I joined to save Kara," he replied.

"That is why you joined Section Two," Claes clarified. "However, I know you were in the SWA before that. In fact, I have heard you were at the beginning. And yet I don't understand why someone as...well, as nice as you, would join an organization that uses the application of extreme violence to achieve its goals."

The fading light of the sun was quickly being replaced by the candlelight on the balcony and the artificial light of the city beyond.

"Do you know the city of Sarajevo?" Michele asked.

"It is the capital city of Bosnia and Herzegovina," Claes replied. "It is also the city where Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife were assassinated, the event widely credited as the *casus belli* for World War I."

"Before Bosnia and Herzegovina became an independent country, it was a republic of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The communists invested heavily in Sarajevo, returning it to the status it enjoyed prior to World War I and the formation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. This culminated in the city being awarded the honor of hosting the XIV Olympic Winter Games in 1984.

"I attended those games and I found a city of strong religious diversity that welcomed Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Christians, Muslims and Jews. While most of the half-million population was ethnically Bosniak or Serb, they lived peacefully with the minority Croats, Sephardi Jews and Roma. Everyone felt both excitement and honor at hosting the games, only four years after Moscow became the first socialist country to host an Olympic event.

"Eight years later, the celebration turned into a funeral. Yugoslavia disintegrated and civil war broke out in the aftermath. The Serbians laid siege to the city for four years and reduced it to rubble killing and wounding tens of thousands and sending over 100,000 into exile as refugees. I took part in the enforcement of the no-fly zones over Bosnia-Herzegovina during NATO's Operation Maritime Monitor, Operation Sky Monitor and the early stages of Operation Deny Flight. Four years after that, I was back, taking part in NATO operations against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to keep them from running roughshod over Kosovo."

Michele rose and entered the apartment, returning shortly with two lead crystal tulip glasses and a bottle of Louis XIII de Rémy Martin cognac. He poured about 60ml into each and handed one to Claes.

"I've never drank hard liquor," she stated.

"There's a first time for everything," Michele noted. "Hold the bottom of the glass in the palm of your hand like this for a few minutes to let your body heat warm the spirit. This will enhance the flavor."

Claes decided to humor Michele and did so. When Michele went to take a sip, she did as well. As the glass passed under her nose, she inhaled a rich and complex aroma of flowers, fruits and spices, causing her to pause. She cautiously took a sip.

"That is...intense..." Claes noted, as the flavors exploded on her palette.

"Only the best," Michele said, taking another sip and leaning back in the chair.

"Anyway, you asked why I joined the Social Welfare Agency. When I left the Aeronautica Militare in 1999, the Padania Republican Faction was just starting to make their presence known in a violent fashion.

Unfortunately, Italy is no stranger to conflict and strife. I grew up during the 'Years of Lead' with their assassinations, bombings, kidnappings, robberies and other mayhem. My father participated in operations against them, but after the assassination of Aldo Moro in 1978 and the Bologna massacre in 1980, the government really cracked-down on the social movement and paramilitary groups and by the mid-1980s things became quiet again.

"So I was not impressed with the PRF seeking the dissolution of Italy through violence and I didn't make a secret of that opinion. Shortly thereafter, Giulio Draghi ran into me – conveniently so, I have come to believe - in the bar of the Rome Cavalieri and walked me out on the Monte Mario grounds to talk about the new security force the Prime Minister wanted to create and whether or not I'd be interested in joining."

Michele took another sip of his cognac and adjusted his position on the chair.

"That was a tough decision for me, Claes. I consider myself a lawful person, and yet I was being asked to join an organization that operated outside the law. It did so to ensure the safety and security of the Republic, but as a fellow student of history, you know the three most dangerous words ever uttered throughout history."

"Fatherland. Motherland. Patriot," Claes stated.

Michele nodded. "I didn't need the work, mind you. I'd earned over €10 million in the US stock market and my investments ensured I could live comfortably for the rest of my life. And yet I did consider myself a patriot and I did not want to see what happened to Sarajevo happen to Milan or Rome. I also did not want to see Italy implode into vicious civil and ethnic war like Yugoslavia did. Now it is true Italy is almost all Italian and Roman Catholic, but immigration by other nationalities and religions is increasing. And we already give one-quarter of the regions home rule to keep them quiet.

"Draghi seemed to sense my discomfort and he recommended me for Public Safety. So until last winter I served as a liaison between Public Safety and the various Italian counter-intelligence and counter-terrorist groups along with Interpol and counterterrorism forces in France, Northern Ireland, Spain and Columbia."

"Spain...that's how you met Kara," Claes noted.

"Yes. I was at Atocha station in Madrid to catch a train for a meeting at Grupo Especial de Operaciones headquarters when the bombs started going off. When I reached the platform, I found Kara and put her on the stretcher and loaded her into the ambulance and watched them drive off to a hospital. I gave my statement on what I'd observed to the authorities and then called Director Reschiglian who ordered me to return to Italy."

"Why her?" Claes asked. Michele refilled both of their sifters.

"She was delirious from pain, calling out in Japanese. I figured I was the only person present who also spoke the language so I went to her to try and calm her down."

"No, I mean why did you chose her as your cyborg?"

"She called me uncle when they loaded her in the ambulance, but they'd just pumped her full of pain-killers and she was drifting in and out of consciousness, so perhaps she was delirious or dreaming. She gripped my hand on the platform and even unconscious, that grip never lessened. She'd given me her name before she passed out and so I looked up what hospital they'd taken her to and I went there."

"Why?"

"Fate? Destiny? I should have been arranging transport back to Italy, but instead I was standing outside an operating room awaiting word on the surgery being performed on a girl I didn't even know. I found out her father had died in the blast and her mother was not expected to survive her injuries. I called Public Safety and had them run a records check. Her father was an only child and her mother had a brother in Japan who didn't want to have anything to do with Kara."

He took another sip, staring out at the darkening skies.

"When I returned to Italy, I still kept an eye out on her by speaking with her doctors. Her long-term prognosis looked grim so I decided to try and bring her to the SWA for treatment, not as a cyborg, but just to see if they could help her in ways the Spanish and French couldn't. The only way to do so ended up being to convert her to a cyborg and as part of the deal I was required to transfer to Special Operations and become her handler. I agreed and you know the rest."

"Does Kara know this?" Claes asked.

"Some of it. She awoke before her cybernetic surgeries were started and they temporarily wiped her memories. Once they determined her brain remained healthy, they started to selectively repress them, much as they did with you during your initial conversion and after Mr. Raballo's death. When Lauro and Elsa were killed, they green-lighted the Series 2 program and Petrushka and Kara both went under the knife and I joined Section 2."

"I'd like to know why I came to the SWA," Claes said.

"It's not important, Claes," Michele replied, taking another sip.

"Maybe not to you, but what about me?" she said, hotly. "Or Kara? Why haven't you told her what you told me?"

"Because what does she gain from it, Claes? How does she benefit knowing her father and mother were literally blown apart by a bomb? Or that she has an uncle in Japan who rejected her because he didn't want to be bothered to take care of a cripple?"

Michele drained his glass and refilled it.

"If your parents are dead, what closure does that provide you, Claes? You don't remember them. They'd be just names to you. Does knowing they're dead make them any more real to you than the belief they might still be alive? And if they aren't dead, but they just decided to get rid of you like Rico's parents did, would that make you feel better about yourself? Or them?"

Claes stared at the remaining layer of brandy coating the bottom of her glass.

"What's going to happen to me?" she asked him after a few minutes.

"What do you mean?"

"I think it's clear that I won't be a member of this *fratello* for the rest of my useful life. Eventually Lorenzo or Jean will want to split me off and pair me with a new handler to create another *fratello*. I don't want to be forced to forget again, Michele. I want to remember fishing with Mr. Raballo. I want to remember driving with you under the stars in Gran Sasso National Park. I want to remember watching the sun set

on Lake Maggiore. I want to remember the satisfaction of watching my garden first blossom.”

She drained her own glass, but declined a refill.

“Besides, you and Kara have genuine affection for each other and I feel very much a ‘third wheel’,” she noted.

“Yes, Kara and I feel affection for each other, though each of us in a different form. She’s a teenager and she therefore leads with her heart, even if she isn’t always clear on what it is her heart is telling her.”

“You indulge her too much,” Claes accused. “For that matter, you indulge me too much.”

“Like you said, Claes. I’m too nice for this job.”

Chapter Twelve – Amongst Friends

"And...done," Alessandro said, pushing back his chair to allow Triela to examine herself in the mirror. Once again, Triela experienced mild surprise at how some tactically-applied prosthetic appliances and make-up could age her appearance by half a decade, allowing her to look like her chronological age of nineteen instead of her physical age of fourteen.

At least she thought she was nineteen. When Hilshire and Mario Bossi rescued her, first from the warehouse and then the hospital in Amsterdam to bring her to the SWA, the medical staff figured her age to be around thirteen. Because of the physical and mental trauma inflicted upon her in that warehouse, Doctors Bianchi and Belesario did not even try to be subtle in their conditioning (not that their concurrent attempts on Angelica ended up being subtle, either) and instead spent the better part of a year bleaching the gray out of her gray matter. With absolutely no information about her available, Hilshire decided that Triela's birthday would be the day she first awoke and looked up at him from the hospital bed, a bit over five years ago.

Even with the prosthetic appliances, her chest-size remained smaller than Petrushka's and Kara's, both of whom sat in chairs waiting for Alessandro to finish. She sometimes wondered if that explained their more...open...relationships with their handlers. She knew Petrushka and Alessandro were less than a decade apart in age, but the gulf between Michele and Kara spanned twice that, as it did with herself and Hilshire. And yet when she vacationed with Michele and Kara in France and Germany last September, they acted very close and familiar with each other the entire time. Michele also noticed Kara's physical appearance, something Hilshire rarely seemed to do with her, though she blushed as she remembered him calling her "beautiful" in the lobby of the Grand Hyatt Berlin.

She rose and finished dressing, adding a blazer in light beige to match her skirt. Her t-shirt and hosiery were black and she wore her brown leather boots. This time Petrushka wore the pantsuit, charcoal grey with an open-neck white dress shirt and black ankle boots. Kara wore a black pencil skirt and three-button jacket with a white open-necked side-zip blouse and black patent leather boots.

"You have the address and everything?" Alessandro asked and Kara nodded.

They left the main building and headed to Michele's Aston Martin, parked in the main lot. As they approached, Kara unlocked the doors with the key fob then tossed it to Triela.

"You sure Michele's okay with this?" Triela asked as she snatched it out of the air.

"What he doesn't know won't hurt him," Kara quipped. At the look of terror on Triela's face, she burst out laughing. "I'm sorry," Kara said. "I promise that I spoke with him about it and he approved. He knows Hilshire doesn't let you practice much, especially in real traffic."

Hilshire finally broke down under the combined weight of Triela and Kara pestering him to let her learn to drive and earn her license. Michele used his membership with the Automobile Club d'Italia to sign her up for training at the Vallelunga Circuit outside Rome. Kara learned how to drive both a car and a motorcycle at Vallelunga and she helped Triela prepare for the written and practical examinations as well as told her what to expect during the training.

Triela slipped behind the Aston's wheel and fired the V12 to life while Kara moved the passenger seat forward for Petrushka to slip in back. Kara strapped in, plugging into the Sat-Nav directions to the Oriental Hotel in Naples where Hilshire awaited them.

"On our way to great adventure!" Kara exclaimed and Triela pushed the "Auto" gearbox button on the center console and pressed gently down on the accelerator, coaxing the Aston forward towards the gate.

They drove to the A90/A1 interchange and headed south towards Naples. Triela settled into the Monday afternoon traffic flow, which drifted between 125 and 150 depending on the section, resisting Kara's cajoling for her to hammer the throttle whenever the highway straightened out or traffic lightened.

Triela exited the A1 one hundred minutes later onto SS162dir and almost immediately took the *Centro Direzionale* off-ramp. The Oriental Hotel occupied fifteen floors in a 100m skyscraper within the civic center located in the Poggioreale section of the city near the central train station. She suddenly remembered that the hotel was where Hilshire had been shot at Christmas.

Triela pulled into the front lobby area and handed the keys to a valet as a bellman transferred the custom luggage from the trunk to a cart. They did not expect to need any heavy firepower, so they all carried their pistols except for Petra, who also carried her Spectre M4.

Having received calls from Triela upon leaving Rome and again as she approached Naples, Hilshire had decided to greet them upon arrival and saw the Aston pull up from his seat in the lounge as well as Triela exiting the driver's side.

"I imagine that drives nicer than my Mercedes," he noted to Triela as he walked outside, causing Triela to blush deep red in embarrassment at being caught. Before Kara could respond, he held up his hand. "I'm sure Michele gave her permission and considering the time it took, I am also sure you behaved yourself." This he said with a knowing nod to Kara, whom tended to treat speed limits as just mere suggestions. "I don't mind you driving without me present, Triela, just let me know beforehand, please," he finished. Triela nodded, sufficiently chastised.

Hilshire handed Kara and Petrushka the key to their shared room and they went upstairs. Kara and Petrushka placed their bags in their room and then joined Hilshire and Triela in their room. They then all went downstairs and piled into Hilshire's Mercedes and headed out.

"As you all know, Roberta Guelfi moved from the position of deputy prosecuting attorney to the Investigative Unit," Hilshire began. "The Camorra feels little love for Padania and did not appreciate them assassinating her predecessor nor their attempted assassination of Roberta herself so they watched out for her during the pre-trial stage until a new deputy prosecutor could be named."

"So we're here why?" Kara asked. Hilshire scowled at her and she did a decent impersonation of Triela earlier at the hotel lobby.

"We're here, Kara, because Ms. Guelfi is helping Michele and Alessandro investigate the people they have made a deal with to smuggle in people, weapons and other items. I also want to discuss with her what we learned from our chat with Bushuyev."

"So why don't we just do this at the Prosecutor's Office?" Kara asked.

"Most of the *Polizia Municipale* are on the take of the Camorra so anything we said would not stay private," Hilshire noted. "She met Mario Bossi and his daughter Maria last Christmas when Triela and I

were here on a mission and we can be sure of their discretion. She also knows Petrushka and I thought it prudent she meet you, as well, should you happen to accompany Michele at a future meeting."

"I understand now," Kara said.

"Remember, Kara, only Mario knows about the cyborg program and then only about Triela, though he will likely have suspicions about you and Petrushka. Our cover for this mission are as members of the Central Directorate for the Anti Terrorism Police under the Polizia di Stato," Hilshire noted and Kara nodded her head. They parked in front of a multi-story apartment complex and headed up the stairs.

"Welcome, ladies. Victor," Mario Bossi greeted at the door. He stepped back and they entered his flat, making their way into the living room where Roberta Guelfi and Mimi Machiavelli sat on the couch. Mimi jumped up and rushed over to Triela, embracing her in a hug. She released Triela and looked at Petra and Kara.

"Mimi, Mario, I want you to meet my colleagues. This is Petrushka and this is Kara." Mimi put out her hand and welcomed both with a large smile. Mario also welcomed both into his home. Roberta already knew Triela and Petrushka, so she and Kara introduced each other.

"Hilshire, I could use your help in the kitchen," Mario requested.

"Of course," Hilshire said.

"I'll help too," Roberta replied, rising off the couch.

When the adults had left the room, Mimi turned back to Triela. "You look older for some reason," she told the blonde cyborg.

"Really?" Triela said, placing her left hand on top of head, trying to look nonchalant about it. "Maybe it's my hair or clothes?"

"Could be...Oh, well," Mimi said. "What have you been doing since Christmas? Did Hilshire give you a new bear?"

"Actually, he bought me a new trench coat...a Versace," Triela replied, reddening slightly.

Mimi's smile grew even wider and she gave Triela a knowing wink, resulting in Triela's shade of red deepening.

Just before they'd come to Naples that last time, Triela had noticed the trench in a Versace boutique. They went inside and she tried it on, mortified to see the price tag was close to €3000. However, when she answered in the affirmative to Hilshire's question if she liked it, he merely nodded and handed his card to the clerk. Triela tried to talk him out of it, but Hilshire replied that it went well with the black sweater, skirt and boots of her outfit at the time, itself the result of a desire last fall to wear something other than business attire all the time.

"I'm glad things are going well with you two. Ms. Guelfi is smart and beautiful and I think she is Mr. Hilshire's type so I was worried about your romance," Mimi said.

"Uh, Mimi..." Triela said, the red now very apparent even against her naturally darker complexion.

"Huh?" Mimi said, confused. She turned to the other two girls. Petrushka leaned forward, her chin resting in her hands and her elbows on her knees. Kara's head was cocked to the right at about a 30° angle, a slightly confused look on her face.

Mimi went red herself, both hands going to her forehead. She reached forward and grabbed Triela's wrist. "Talk amongst yourselves!" she called back to Kara and Petrushka as she dragged Triela back to her room.

"Sorry!" Mimi said as she flopped down on the bed. "I didn't mean to embarrass you in front of your colleagues."

"It's okay, Mimi. Both Kara and Petrushka have feelings for their partners, as well. It's just things between Hilshire and I are...complicated."

Mimi nodded sagely. "Things were difficult for me and my boyfriend during the time papa was testifying at the trial. Even after you captured the kidnappers, my ability to see him remained limited. And then when papa finished, he came back to live with me here so that put a crimp on being able to spend time with him alone."

"Are you still together?" Triela asked.

Mimi nodded her head. "He saved me from being a bad girl and I love him very much. Like I told you last spring, you cannot keep your feelings to yourself. I made sure he knew my feelings and I think that helped us stay together during those difficult times."

"Mario must like him, since he would likely scare any potential suitor off if he did not," Triela noted with a smile.

"Papa wants me to be happy and he also knows the positive influence my boyfriend exerts on me so he's been very supportive of our relationship – at least to a point," Mimi noted with a knowing wink.

"Have you expressed your true feelings for Mr. Hilshire to him?" Mimi asked, moving to remove a bear from her shelf.

"Yes," Triela admitted, remembering her embrace and kiss of Hilshire back in their hotel room last Christmas.

"Good for you!" Mimi said, giving Triela a hug. "What did he say?"

"He was asleep at the time."

Mimi shook her head. "I will have to settle for baby steps, I guess. Next time, make sure he's awake."

"Tell who what when they're awake?" Petrushka asked before Kara could knock on the open door to announce their presence.

"Just drop it, Petrushka," Triela growled.

"Come in!" Mimi said. She removed a teddy bear in the home colors of S.S.C. Napoli off the shelf. "This is Rodolfo. My father buys me a teddy bear every year for Christmas. Do either of you play football?" she asked and both Kara and Petrushka nodded their heads.

"What positions?" Mimi asked.

"Center forward," Kara replied.

"Offensive midfielder," Petrushka added.

Mimi jumped forward and grabbed Kara's hands in her own. "Really? That's the position I play, too! You're not an A.S. Roma fan, I hope," Mimi said, making a sour face.

"Hey!" Triela, a fan of the team, exclaimed.

"My han—partner is from Milan so we both support A.C. Milan," Kara replied.

"I dislike A.S. Roma," Mimi noted. "They're our rivals in the Derby del Sole as well as being the closest Serie A team to us."

"Yes, things get heated when we face F.C. Internazionale Milano in the Derby della Madonnina," Kara noted. "We're also not fond of A.S. Roma, though Genoa C.F.C. declared vendetta against us in 1995 when a Milan hooligan fatally stabbed a Genoa one."

Mimi's face crinkled in disgust. "Supporting your team enthusiastically is one thing, but to actually try and hurt or even kill someone over it is just crazy."

The four returned to the living room where Hilshire and Roberta were pouring wine into glasses. Kara swirled the wine around in the glass a few times to help aerate it and then took a sip.

"It reminds me of a Sangiovese or Chianti, though with a strong cherry flavor."

"It's a '01 Machiavelli Chianti Classico Riserva," Hilshire noted.

"Interesting. Tuscan wines tend to be over-oaked, but this one is not," Kara stated.

"You sound like a wine connoisseur," Roberta noted with a smile.

"Her knowledge is extensive," Hilshire noted. "She'd make a great sommelier at a five-star hotel."

"Dinner is ready," Mario noted, bringing out a huge bowl of *maccheroni alla napoletana* and placing it on the table before them. He went back and returned with a 45cm *pizza napoletana* and Mimi brought out a set of plates and a basket of fresh-baked garlic bread. Marco dished up the meal and they all settled in to eat.

"How goes your investigation?" Hilshire asked Roberta as they ate.

"I've compiled a background on Giancarlo Barese and it's not pretty," Roberta replied.

"He looked scary," Petrushka noted, remembering back to the meeting in Foggia.

"You don't become a *caporegime* based on your looks," Mario noted. "I'm living proof of that."

"I think your handsome, papa," Mimi said.

"Then we need to get you to an optometrist," Mario replied, earning him a playfully reproachful shove from his daughter.

"It takes a motivated person to join organized crime in the first place, and an even more motivated person to rise up in the ranks," Roberta added. "Let's just say Signor Barese appears to be very motivated—and dangerous."

"That seemed to be the feeling I received from Nikolay Bushuyev," Hilshire noted. "He stated that the Russian Mafia made a play to try and push some of the weaker SCU groups out of Apulia. While the Camorra and the SCU are not tight, Signor Barese's *Capo Bastone* took a dim view of the Russian's playing so close to their own territory and sent Signore Barese to...make that displeasure known to the Russians. They got the hint and pulled back north, deciding to work with the Albanians instead of against them to their mutual benefit."

"You think Barese might be a danger to Roberta?" Mario asked.

"Not at this time, but he appears to be a person who is not averse to using violence to advance or protect his position," Hilshire noted. "We designed the deal Alessandro and Michele offered to him to make it very lucrative so he would push his superiors to agree to it because we need it to happen. Therefore, we will want to be sure that we all proceed with caution."

"I've been taking care to cover my tracks," Roberta replied. "I know the local authorities are heavily infiltrated by the Camorra so I've been keeping my use of government databases to a minimum and staying away from the informants on retainer, assuming they are all compromised."

"A prudent precaution," Hilshire said.

"I may have to take some more risks once Mr. Pagani or Mr. Ricci learn the names of the crew Barese hires, but I promise to be careful," Roberta said to Hilshire with a smile. Neither Triela nor Mimi missed Hilshire smiling back.

Triela pulled the Mercedes into the front lobby area of the Oriental Hotel late that evening.

"Do you need any help?" Petrushka asked.

"No, I can take care of it. Thanks," Triela replied and Petrushka could hear the disappointment in her voice.

After dinner, the girls had returned to Mimi's room to play *2006 FIFA World Cup*, which had literally come out just two days prior, on her PS/2. Mimi played Italy; Kara, Japan; Triela, Germany; and since Russia did not take part in the 2006 Cup, Petrushka played Ukraine.

Meanwhile, the adults opened a few more bottles of wine and imbibed themselves to a state of "reduced cognitive performance". Therefore when it came time to head back to the hotel, Triela took the keys and she and Kara helped Hilshire lie across the back seat. Roberta also found herself too inebriated to drive so Kara drove her home in Roberta's Citroën C3 Pluriel then caught a cab back to the hotel.

Chapter Thirteen – Cleaning the Plugs

While the Five Republics Faction desired the end of the Italian Republic as it currently consisted, even they celebrated the liberation of the country from the Nazi's. Therefore, only the Croce *fratelli* were on stand-by that day and to take advantage of the light traffic, the Pagani and the Hillshire *fratelli* started their respective returns to Rome on Liberation Day.

The trip for Michele and Claes from Milan approached 500km, two and a half times the distance Triela, Kara and Petrushka would cover from Naples. Yet through a quirk of coincidence, helped by departure time and average speed, Michele took the A1 South to A24 East off-ramp in the Lamborghini at almost the identical time that Triela, behind the wheel of the Aston Martin, turned onto the A1 North to A24 East off-ramp.

As the two off-ramps started to converge, Kara glanced out the front passenger seat window and her jaw dropped as she saw a Gallardo Spyder in Rosso Leto paint approach on the other ramp. She knew only one Lamborghini Gallardo Spyder currently existed in that color and with the top down, a hard stare resolved into an older man and a young woman inside.

"Quick! Floor it!" Kara shouted.

"What?" Triela exclaimed.

"That's Michele and Claes!" Kara yelled, pointing to the other car.

"Are you sure?" Triela asked, trying to look while also keeping the car on course in the off-ramp.

The cars were almost beside each other, separated by a narrowing dirt strip that transitioned into a narrowing painted paved area. Michele looked over to gauge the distance to the car and realized it was his black DB9.

"Yes! Go! Go!" Kara ordered, tossing Michele a jaunty wave.

Triela pushed down hard on the throttle with her right boot and the six-liter V12 responded instantly, 600 N·m of torque pushing all three girls back into their seats. The Lamborghini faded backwards as the

speedometer quickly climbed past 100km/h.

"So she wants to play, does she," Michele noted. He used the steering wheel paddles to drop two gears and called upon the power of the car's V-10. The Gallardo launched forward in pursuit, the all-wheel drive system applying the power for maximum acceleration.

In less than thirty seconds the Aston covered a kilometer and the speedometer nudged 235km/h. The faster the car went, the better it felt so Triela kept her foot down as the road unwound before her. The two of them were on their own private road split from the main carriageway so there were no cars ahead of them to worry about.

Behind her, Petrushka craned her neck and upper torso to look out the back window. "They're closing!" she yelled.

With more power and less weight, the Gallardo gained on the Aston, soon pulling abreast and then slightly ahead. Both cars could reach over 300km/h, but as they passed a sign stating a toll plaza loomed 500m ahead, Triela started to back off, Michele following a moment later. Both cars were equipped with carbon-ceramic brakes that glowed cherry-red as they worked to haul the cars down to the 75km/h speed limit for the express gate for cars with electronic toll collection transponders.

Once through the gate, Michele pulled over into a side parking area and Triela pulled up alongside.

"Hey slowpoke!" Kara called out after lowering the window.

"Nicely driven, Triela," Michele complimented. Beside him, Claes tried to regain control of long hair blown about in a 275km/h wind.

"Kara made me do it!" Triela exclaimed, leaning forward to clear Kara's head and shoulders.

"Did not! Besides, you enjoyed it, didn't you?" Kara shot back.

"Yeah, I did," Triela admitted, blushing.

"Have you girls eaten yet?" Michele asked. The three shook their heads.

"How about Berlioni's?" Michele asked, referring to a well-rated family

style restaurant north of the city in the commune of Ponte Mammolo.

"Heck yeah!" Kara said, Berlioni's being a favorite of hers. "You two will love it," she told Triela and Petrushka.

"Sounds good," Petrushka replied.

"Can we swap, Kara? I didn't take a pain killer this morning and I'm a bit sore," Michele noted.

Kara motioned Triela to move forward to clear the Lamborghini so she could open the door.

"This car is amazing, Michele. I absolutely love driving it," Triela noted to him as he strapped into the passenger seat.

"*Top Gear* didn't give it it's own section on the Cool Wall for nothing," he noted with a wink. "How are you doing, Petrushka?"

"I am well, Colonel. Thank you," she said.

In the Gallardo, Kara strapped in and started the car, following the Aston back onto the Autostrade.

"How was Milan?" she asked Claes.

"Pleasant weather."

"Did you and Michele do anything interesting?"

"We stayed in the apartment. I read in the park and helped with chores. Nothing really special," Claes replied.

Good, Kara thought.

"Please don't tell Hillshire about the drag race," Triela asked Michele and Petrushka as the Aston passed a service area just west of the A90 interchange. "He's already annoyed at me for driving down to Naples without telling him and that would probably send him off the deep end."

"Just tell him I asked you to clean the spark plugs," Michele noted.

"Clean the spark plugs?"

"Over time, the plugs become fouled with carbon deposits so a full-throttle run burns off those deposits, helping restore performance and fuel economy. In fact, I think the plugs might still be a bit fouled," he noted, observing the light traffic on this stretch of the road.

"Well then, I guess we should clean them," Triela noted with a smile.

The two cars took the Viale Palmiro Togliatti exit at approximately twice the posted speed and then followed the road due north into Ponte Mammolo. Berlioni's Ristorante overlooked a small river and the two cars pulled into the parking lot. Once everyone assembled inside, they were quickly escorted to a table on a wood deck near the river.

"Welcome to Berlioni's!" their server greeted as she laid out two one-liter bottles of San Pellegrino mineral water. "Have any of you been here before?" she asked and Kara enthusiastically nodded her head while Michele slightly raised his right hand.

"Welcome back," she greeted as she handed out menus. "For the rest of you, Berlioni's is a family-style restaurant so we serve the food on large platters and encourage sharing. The small portion will comfortably serve two and the large will serve four. I'll give you a few moments to review the menu."

As she spoke, another person came and placed a large *antipasti* platter with cured meats, olives, roasted garlic, *pepperoncini*, mushrooms, anchovies, artichoke hearts, various cheeses and *peperone* along with a toasted bruschetta covered with melted mozzarella and diced tomatoes. Before she left, Michele ordered a bottle of 2000 Rainoldi Valtellina Superiore Inferno.

The waitress returned a few minutes later with the wine and poured a glass for everyone. She then started taking the orders, starting with Triela.

"Large *pollo parmigiana*," she stated.

"Large *linguini fritti di mare*," Kara ordered.

"Large *ravioli al pomodoro*," Claes added.

"Large *penne arrabbiata*," Petrushka noted.

"And for you, sir?" she asked Michele.

"Small *fettuccine al burro e panna*," he replied.

"Very good. I'll bring some extra plates," she said.

"That won't be necessary," Michele noted and the waitress blinked in surprise, but nodded and went to place the order with the kitchen.

The food arrived on platters almost a half-meter wide and easily weighing over a kilogram. The girls descended upon them like locusts on a wheat field. Once they'd made some room on their own platter, they started leeching off each other's platters. Michele's *fettuccine* had come in what look to him a salad bowl, though the steep sides did not stop Kara from tactically employing her fork to snatch away a ball of pasta from him.

"I need to get some things from my apartment, so Claes and I will take the Gallardo and you three head back to the compound in the Aston. And try to keep it under 200, Kara," Michele requested as they walked to the parking lot after lunch.

Kara noted and slipped behind the wheel of the Aston as Petrushka moved into back and Triela took the passenger seat.

"You're a bad influence on those two," Claes noted to Michele, referring to Triela and Kara, as she strapped in.

"I'd be happy to teach you to drive if you're feeling left out of the fun," Michele offered.

Claes stared at him like he'd told her the sky was purple. "I'm 12."

"No, you only look 12," Michele replied.

"Okay, I'm 15. That is still three years younger than the legal driving age."

"You're a smart girl. I think you can figure out how to drive."

Claes merely scowled at him.

"You're cute when you're angry," Michele noted as he started the car.

Claes looked adorable all the way to his apartment.

The End