

*This story uses characters and locations based on the Gunslinger Girl manga written by Yu Aida and published in monthly shōnen magazine Dengeki Daioh. The characters of Kara and Michele are original to myself.*

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## "Yume no Kakeru"

[Fragment of a Dream]

A Gunslinger Girl Original Story by Kiskaloo

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The late July sun streamed down across the Lazio region of the Italian Peninsula. As the rays sprayed across the province of Rome, some fell upon a rectangular three-story building and streamed in through the open window on the third floor to reflect off the glasses of a young girl who stood before the ledge, enjoying the warmth those rays brought and the smell of the pine trees on the breeze.

"Ugh..."

The girl turned towards the sound. "Good morning, Triela," Claes said.

"Are we going to have to go through this every sunny weekend?" Triela groused, running her hair through her bangs. "I'd like to be able to sleep in at least one Saturday."

"Then perhaps you should have Hillshire stop scheduling morning practices on days you know will be nice," Claes replied with a smile.

Triela shook her head. "I'd rather be sleepy than soaked."

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Michele was weeding in his garden that same morning when he heard Claes come up. As opposed to her own novice efforts, Michele was a master gardener and he'd chosen a large plot near the main administrative building. He'd chosen to do a cross between traditional raised bed gardening and Mel Bartholomew's "square foot gardening" to allow easy access to the plots and because different vegetables, herbs and flowers needed different amounts of space to grow in, allowing him to best-utilize the available space. What was once just a patch of dirt was now a thriving vegetable garden.

At first, Claes had been a bit ambivalent about a new garden plot appearing. Not out of selfishness, but because she enjoyed the peace and tranquility working the small plot she cultivated offered her.

Henrietta or Beatrice would sometimes help out and Triela or Rico would pass the time with her while she worked. She had been afraid that the new garden would negate the need for her own, however it proved to be that her garden was perfect for growing herbs which Michele would combine with the vegetables from his garden so they nicely complemented each other. It also offered her an opportunity to practice more advanced gardening techniques.

The staff also appreciated Michele's larger garden and often enjoyed taking lunches or just relaxing in the grass nearby, listening to the wind rustle through the plants and enjoying the pleasant aromas from the flowers.

"*Buon pomeriggio,*" Claes greeted. "May I join you?" She was dressed in a black t-shirt and denim shorts with a large straw hat and sandals.

"Of course," Michele said. "I'd enjoy the company."

"Don't like talking to the plants?" Claes joked.

"I find that the thyme lacks the background to properly discuss Nietzsche. And have you ever tried to discuss Kafka with a zucchini?" Michele said in mock horror, causing Claes to burst out laughing.

"How are the tomatoes coming?" she asked, looking at the lush vines around a row of sticks.

"They're ripening nicely. Maybe in a week or so they'll be ready. I'm thinking of a nice ragù with some ziti pasta."

They continued chatting about various subjects as they worked. Claes didn't know where she'd heard it, but she did recall someone telling her that soldiers were well-educated and curious. And as a Reserve Air Force Colonel, Michele was very well-educated. His library was an impressive one and she often borrowed books from it when she could find nothing of interest in her own library or the one she had access to in the Handler's Dormitory. As Claes watered the herbs from a watering can, she started to sing.

"A fan of Simon & Garfunkel?" Michele asked after Claes finished.

"What?" she asked.

"That song you were just singing. It was released by them the year

after I was born. It's a favorite of mine."

"I didn't realize I was singing out loud. I'm sorry," she said, embarrassed.

"Don't be. You have a beautiful voice," Michele complimented. "Kara says she heard you play it on the piano."

"I've had this song stuck in my head for some time. I don't know why," she said, shrugging.

"I believe you are reading Francis James Child's Popular English and Scottish Ballads," Michele noted. "The Elfin Knight is the second ballad in that collection, which is itself a retelling of the first ballad, Riddles Wisely Expounded, though there it is the Devil who threatens to take the fair maiden, not an elf knight, and the knight must perform seemingly impossible tasks as opposed to answering riddles.

"That ballad was originally Scottish. However, the English got their hands on it and changed it. In the English version, a young man tells the listener to ask his former lover to perform a series of impossible tasks. If she does so, the young man promises to take her back."

"Sounds rather chauvinistic of him," Claes replied. Overhead, a hawk called out to its mate as it rode a thermal.

Michele chuckled. "Usually the ballad was sung as a duet, with the woman requiring equally impossible tasks to prove that he is worthy of being her true love, as well. The original ballad was much longer, with some 50 lines. When Simon & Garfunkel recorded their version, they took one stanza from the men's part and two from the woman's, which they then changed the gender from male to female."

"How do you know all this stuff?" Claes asked.

"Soldiers need to be well-read," Michele stated. "A good soldier is curious, and that curiosity makes that soldier want to study and they do that by reading a great deal."

"And what of the four herbs? What is their meaning?" Claes asked.

"That is a subject of much debate," Michele noted. "Evidently it only entered the ballad in relatively recent versions, so some think it's just there as an alternate rhyming refrain to whatever originally preceded

it. Others believe they're symbolism for either traits like courage and faithfulness."

"What do you think it means?" Claes asked.

"To misquote the late Doctor Sigmund Freud, I think that sometimes, a herb is just a herb."

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"You wished to see me?" Michele asked later that afternoon as he stepped into the office of the Director of Special Operations, Section 2.

"We want you to take Claes with you on the Geneva operation," Director Lorenzo said.

"Are you sure that is wise after Piedmont?" Michele advised. It had been only a few days since Claes and Petra had captured the two bombers trying to escape to Switzerland over Lake Maggiore.

"That is why we want you to take her," Jean Croce stated. "We've been using her to test new biomechatronics devices and systems, but only in the lab. We want to gain some field data, as well."

Michele looked both unconvinced and unimpressed.

"You were going to take her with Kara to Monaco at the end of that week, anyway, so it would save you coming back to pick her up," Jean stated.

"She didn't want to come to Monaco," Michele noted. "Kara had to convince her to do that, even though Claes evidently loves looking at the ocean. She seems to think we're all being 'suspiciously nice' to her, to quote her words to Alessandro."

"We still think it is beneficial for her to get out more," Lorenzo said, his tone making it clear that Michele's concerns notwithstanding, he wanted her to accompany he and Kara.

"What will be her role?"

"She'll be acting as your daughter," Jean said.

"What if she doesn't want to come?" Michele asked.

"You're assuming she has a choice," Jean noted.

"Ordering her to do something she didn't want to was what caused her to freeze at Piedmont in the first place," Michele growled. "And that damn near caused her to be injured and could have blown the mission if not for Petra."

"Michele, it is not our place to judge how a handler interacts with their cyborg, as long as they get results," Lorenzo noted. "But do not make the mistake of assuming that these girls have free-will. They are programmed to obey orders and that programming is separate from the additional conditioning you choose to give – or not give – them. Claes will follow your orders in the end because that is what she is programmed to do."

Michele didn't feel like arguing, so he nodded his acceptance.

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"*Entrare*," Michele called out in response to the knock on his door that evening. While he spent the majority of his time at an apartment in Rome, like all the handlers he had a room at the compound that was a square five meters on a side. Against the far wall stood a long and tall adjustable bookcase wall system composed of six 1m wide shelves and six half-meter high rows. The bottom two rows were covered with wooden swinging doors. The upper shelves were filled mostly with books and personal items, though there were three larger areas with glass shelves and lit from the shelf above. The area on the far left column held a 1:100 scale mahogany model of a Boeing E-3A Sentry AWACS plane in NATO colors. It's opposite on the far right column held a 1:100 scale mahogany model of a Boeing 777-200ER in Alitalia livery. In the center two columns was a double-wide shelf with four high-quality 1:18 scale models of the Ferrari 412T and F310B Formula One cars and the Sauber-Mercedes C9 and Peugeot 905B Le Mans prototypes.

In the corner under the window was a corner desk, dominated by a 30" Apple Cinema Display. Michele was working on the flight plan for the upcoming flight to Geneva so the display was covered in spreadsheets, calculators, and Internet browser windows. Hanging from the left side was an Apple PowerMac G5 in a stand and on the right between the desk and the wall unit was a three-drawer unit on casters. To the left of the computer, against the west wall, was a six-drawer (three high by two wide) chest where Michele kept his clothes. On top of that was a TV shelf which held his video components. On top

of that was a Sony 32" LCD television, facing the full-size bed which was pushed perpendicularly against the east wall. Between the bed and the wall unit was a sliding door that led to a private bathroom.

He turned and saw Claes step inside. She was dressed in a pajama top and bottom with slippers. She had a book in her hand – Decision at Sea: Five Naval Battles that Shaped American History.

"I wanted to return this," she noted.

"What did you think?" Michele asked.

"The descriptions of the battle were a little dry," she noted. "However, I was surprised how quickly naval technology advanced between each battle."

"War often spurs greater development than peace," Michele noted. The electric kettle on his desk indicated it was ready.

"I'm making some hot chocolate. Would you like some?" Michele offered.

"Uhm..."

"It's Moonstruck," Michele noted.

"Yes, please," Claes said. Moonstruck Chocolates was a specialty chocolate maker in the western United States and Claes agreed with Michele and Kara that it was exceptionally good. Michele prepared two cups and handed one to Claes, who took a seat on the end of the bed.

Michele moved to close the window.

"Can you leave it open, please?" Claes asked. "I like the breeze."

"Wrap that throw around you, then," Michele stated. "I don't want you catching a cold."

"You're being nice to me again. Something must be on your mind," Claes observed.

Michele leaned back in his chair. "Lorenzo and Jean want you to come to Geneva with Kara and I prior to our trip to Monaco."

"What's in Geneva?"

"One of the big financial backers of the Five Republics - and a few other terrorist organizations around Europe and Asia - is going to be in Geneva for a meeting. If we can take him out, it would put a serious crimp on their funding. So they are sending Kara and I along with Henrietta and Giuseppe to see if we can eliminate him."

"Why do they want me?" she asked. "It sounds like I'd be a fifth wheel."

"They're worried about what happened at Piedmont. Aboard the boat. They want to test you in the field again."

Claes lowered her eyes and he saw her take a few breaths. "Ok," she said.

"You don't have to come if you don't want, Claes."

"Michele, for someone who has known about Section 2 for so long, you really are naïve at times about how it works," she noted. She expected him to argue with her, so she decided to change the subject before he could start.

"Is that the flight plan to Geneva you are working on?" she asked.

Michele nodded.

"Can you show me?"

"You have an interest in being a pilot?"

"Kara was talking about having to file one. I'm curious."

"Okay. There are about two dozen fields that need to be filled out," Michele began.

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In the main briefing room the following morning, Michele, Kara, Claes, Giuseppe and Henrietta sat in chairs as Ferro took the podium. Ferro dimmed the lights and a color picture appeared on the screen.

"Franjo Lompar," Ferro introduced. "Serbian businessman who made a killing, well, killing. He smuggled arms and other supplies to the Army

of Republika Srpska and Serbian paramilitary groups like the Scorpions and the Serb Volunteer Guard. He was close to Željko Ražnatović, though some say he was the one who put the hit out on Željko before his trial to keep him from talking. NATO's Operation Deliberate Force in 1995 forced him underground for a while, but he soon re-emerged again in Serbia proper and helped support Serbian efforts to gain control over Kosovo, including hiring gangs of thugs to go around and disrupt the referendum on independence.

"When the balloon went up in Kosovo, he was active in supporting Yugoslav and Serbian security forces against the Kosovo Liberation Army. He also played a role in the Preševo Valley insurgency and had his hands in plenty of smuggling operations via Macedonia during the 1990s thanks to bribed contacts in the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia.

"When Filippo Adani turned state's evidence on Pirazzi, that took Pirazzi out of the picture and the PRF needed a new sugar daddy to help fund operations. Lompar could care less about the PRF's goals, but he's seen the money the Mafia are making controlling the south and he'd like to see if he can do the same up north. His contacts also are helping smuggling in weapons, explosives and drugs, amongst other things."

"Sounds like a prince of a guy," Giuseppe said, sarcastically.

"He may not be as rich as Pirazzi, but he's more dangerous. So the order has been given to try and eliminate him. We have been informed that he will be in Geneva for some business, so this is our best chance to get at him since he doesn't have the security he does back in Belgrade," Ferro noted.

"That is where you come in, Michele. Would it be possible for you to take your Avanti to Geneva?" Ferro asked.

"Sure. Kara could use the hours and I'd just as soon bypass da Vinci," Michele stated, referring to Rome's main international airport.

"Lompar has reserved the Royal Suite at the Hotel des Bergues. We've taken the liberty of reserving the Rousseau Suite for you, Michele, since we figured anything less would not meet your standards," Ferro said with a knowing smile.

"It's only about a 90 minute hop to Geneva so you will leave tomorrow

morning and will scope out the hotel that evening. Lompar has a personal event outside of the hotel that evening and we're not sure when, or even if, he will be back. We do know, however, that he is hosting a private dinner in his suite the following day. We expect you won't be able to make the strike until that evening and then leave following morning for Germany while Henrietta and Giuseppe head to Zurich and then back to Rome."

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"Absolutely not!" Claes said, stamping her right foot in emphasis, as she examined herself in front of the mirror in Kara's room later that morning.

"You look great," Petrushka said, somewhat perturbed at Claes' response to her work over the past half hour. "You're going to have the guys falling all over you!"

"I have the body of a twelve year old, Petra! I don't want guys falling all over me!" Claes exclaimed.

"You're supposed to be the daughter of a rich industrialist," Petrushka noted. "And according to the fashion magazines Sandro buys for me, this is what the hip rich teen girls are wearing."

"Well I'm not a hip girl," Claes said. "And I am really, really uncomfortable wearing this."

"You wear short skirts around the compound," Peta noted. "So this one's a bit shorter. What's the problem?"

"You do look more mature," Kara—who was wearing a denim mini skirt and a white shirt with the top half of buttons undone—noted. Claes rolled her eyes at her in response.

"I wish I could look mature for Giuse," Henrietta noted wistfully.

"You're not helping, Henrietta," Claes snapped. Henrietta wilted before her and Claes felt bad for taking her frustrations out on her, but she was too upset to apologize at that moment.

"It just looks...wrong..." she added. "It's not...me." And with that, she ran out of the room.

"Well that went well," Petra deadpanned.

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"Trying a new look, Claes?" Triela asked, surprised, when she ran into Claes on the grounds.

Claes' eyes flashed anger, but she ignored Triela's question and asked one of her own. "Have you seen Michele?"

"He was washing his new Ferrari out near the garage," Triela said. Claes brushed past her and marched down the path towards the garage area.

Michele was drying off the back of his car when he heard a heavy stomping on the gravel. He looked up to see Claes standing before the car, bent over with her hands on her hips. She was wearing make-up and her hair was loose, styled with gel. She wore a plaid blazer with brown leather trim over a white t-shirt, a brown denim micro mini skirt and brown knee-high riding boots.

"Why do I have to look like this?" she demanded.

Michele looked at her in confusion. "Why would you want to?" he asked.

Claes scowled at him in response. "Would you let Kara dress like this?" she asked.

"I wouldn't let her be caught dead in an outfit like that," Michele stated.

"I know I am supposed to be your teen-aged daughter and you're rich and Petra says that means I'm supposed to dress like this, but it really makes me uncomfortable," Claes said as she paced back and forth.

"Petra gets her fashion sense from a dirt—" Michele bit his tongue on the rest of his comment.

"So I can tell Petra you said 'no'?" Claes asked.

"Not just 'no', but 'hell no'," Michele replied. "Let me finish cleaning the car and then we can go shopping for some outfits for you that you both like and that are appropriate for the mission."

"Great! I need to go change!" she said and dashed off.

"Teenagers," Michele muttered, going back to drying his F430.

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Claes was walking the grounds near the indoor shooting range in the late afternoon when she saw Kara and Michele crossing the parking area. Kara carried a rifle case in one hand and a small duffel bag in the other while Michele carried a smaller pistol case.

Kara saw her and waved. Claes changed course and went towards them.

"Need to get in some practice for the mission," Kara noted, hefting the rifle case.

"Can I watch?" Claes asked, suddenly, her words surprising herself as much as they did Michele and Kara.

"Jean didn't put you up to this, did he?" Michele growled.

"No he didn't!" Claes exclaimed. "Gods, Michele! He's not the devil," she stated. "And stop being so damn sympathetic all the time," she added, hotly.

"I'd appreciate you spotting for me," Kara said. "Michele is too critical of my shooting at times and I would prefer a fresh opinion."

Claes moved on towards the entrance, Kara falling in behind her. She turned and mouthed the Japanese word for "idiot" at him. Michele sighed and followed along.

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Michele checked in all three and they took the elevator down to the actual range area. They checked in downstairs with the range master, who assigned them stand 12 on the shooting line as that position had a range of up to 750 meters to accommodate assault rifles firing 5.56x45mm NATO, 7.62x51mm NATO, the Russian 7.62x39mm and 5.45x39mm, .30-06 Springfield and .308 Winchester along with other longer-ranged rounds.

Michele pulled two sets of heavy ear protector muffs, one of which he gave to Kara and one to Claes. For himself, he removed a set of heavy-duty ear plugs. They were not as effective at baffling the noise, but with Claes acting as the spotter he would be in the seats against

the far wall and that would help a bit to help attenuate the noise. He also removed three sets of eye protection.

"How long has it been since you've been on the range?" Michele asked.

"I don't recall," she replied, truthfully.

"Very well. Once Kara is ready, you are not to cross the white line into the stand for any reason, period. If you see a problem or Kara looks to need help, you wave your right arm high in the air in a circular motion, like this." He proceeded to demonstrate. "Do not approach her or attempt to touch her. Do you understand?"

"I understand, sir," she said. Michele nodded to both Claes and Kara to proceed.

Kara took the large case and placed it on the ledge in front of the stand. She lifted the lid and encased in heavy-duty Polyurethane flexible foam was what appeared to be various pieces of an assault rifle.

"This is the Heckler & Koch XM8 rifle," Kara explained. "It fires the 5.56x45mm NATO round from either a 30-round box or 100-round drum magazine. It is planned to become the new infantry rifle for the United States armed forces.

"As you can see from all these parts, it has multiple versions, all built around a common receiver." She pointed to a piece with a trigger and grip. "Depending on what role, I can use either the 318mm carbine barrel, a 229mm compact carbine barrel or a 508mm rifle barrel. Normally I operate it as a compact carbine, but today I want to use the sharpshooter variant, so I will use the 508mm barrel."

She removed the common receiver and the proper barrel, which she then attached to the front of the receiver. Next, she took the removable carry handle and attached it to the top. "Now I will connect the adjustable butt stock to the back of the receiver. This stock is used with all modes but the compact carbine. In that case, there is a short butt cap that goes on the end. I now slip the normal handguard over the barrel and attach it to the front of the receiver. There is also this shorter compact carbine handguard." She pointed out the various pieces.

"And lastly, the advanced multi-function optical site." She attached this to the top and removed two 30-round magazines, which she placed with the rifle to the side. She then closed the case and placed it down on the floor, against the side of the stand well away from her feet.

"Okay, I'm ready to fire," she reported to Michele. Claes promptly stepped just behind the white line and put on her ear protectors. She then put on her safety glasses over her normal glasses.

"Position 12, ready to fire!" Michele barked, even though they were the only people on the range.

"Position 12, cleared to fire!" Michele ordered. Kara nodded and took one of the magazines. She gently tapped it on the stand to settle the rounds inside and then slapped it into the receiver. She then cocked and closed the action and set the selector to the three-round burst mode, meaning three rounds would fire for every squeeze of the trigger.

She took aim at the target 300m downrange and squeezed off ten three-round bursts in quick succession. She raised her weapon and opened the action before removing the magazine and placing the rifle on the counter. She pushed a button and the target silhouette came forward. The head and torso area were both well-shredded, showing that most, if not all, of the rounds had impacted in that area. She replaced the silhouette and sent it back down, this time to the 400m mark. She then inserted the second magazine, engaged the action, received permission to fire, and started shooting. On the sixth pull, her weapon jammed on the second round. She called out the jam and Michele responded with "SPORTS".

Claes looked side-to-side and then stepped back to where Michele was standing. "What's SPORTS?" she asked. Michele indicated for her to watch Kara.

"It's a mnemonic to help remember how to clear a jam," he said. "She'll first Slap the magazine, then Pull back the hammer to clear the jam. She will Observe that the chamber is clear and Release the breech. Finally she Taps the chamber and then Shoots the weapon to verify operation." As Michele explained it, Kara performed the steps and completed the firing exercise. Once done, she again opened the action and removed the magazine before recalling the target. As with

the first one, it appeared that all the rounds had landed either in the head or upper torso.

"Well done, Kara," Michele said approvingly, earning a smile from Kara. She leaned down and grabbed the round that had jammed, looking for any marks that could explain how it jammed and finding one. She handed it to Michele, who nodded his recognition of the problem.

"Okay, set it to full auto and run two more magazines through it, just to be sure the mechanism is fine," he ordered. Kara nodded and retrieved two magazines from the duffel bag. With a firing rate of over 10 rounds a second, it took only three seconds to empty each magazine and none jammed. Kara placed the weapon on a set of brackets on the right side of the stand to allow the barrel to cool. She then reached into the duffel bag and removed a small broom and dustpan. On her knees she quickly swept up the 119 spent shell casings from the floor and dumped them into the provided metal bucket.

"Always be sure to police your brass when you are done shooting, Claes," Michele said. "It shows respect for your fellow shooters." Kara opened the rifle case and broke down the XM8, putting each piece in its respective cut-out in the foam. She handed the rifle case back to Michele, who passed forward the pistol case. Kara opened it and removed one of two Heckler & Koch P2000 SK "sub-compact" pistols along with two 10-round magazines loaded with .40 S&W rounds. She loaded the first target and sent it on its way. Once again, she received permission to fire and sent 10 rounds 20m down range. She then swapped magazines and sent 10 more rounds after it. She recalled the target and there were 10 holes each in the head and upper torso area.

"Fantastic," Michele said as he gripped her shoulder, causing Kara to beam with pride. "Go ahead and do two more magazines." Kara nodded and prepared herself while Michele went back and sat down on one of the chairs along the back wall. Claes came over and sat next to him.

"She basks in your praise."

"I admittedly do not drill her as regularly as some of the other handlers, so her name seldom appears at the top of the list." Michele indicated a board that had a list of all the active cyborgs. Triela's name was at the top, followed by Rico's. Kara's was in the middle. "However,

she is still sufficiently accurate at the ranges she will likely engage a target at and her performance makes me very proud of her and I want her to know that. Now, if you will excuse me, it is time for me to get in some practice, as well."

Michele stood and went over to the stand, removing a leather pistol case out of the duffel bag before walking down to position 10. He unzipped the leather case and pulled out a plastic holster and gun wrapped in a clean lint-free rag along with a magazine loaded with 9x19mm rounds.

"That's a VP, isn't it?" Claes noted.

"The Heckler & Koch VP70-M pistol," Michele confirmed with a nod of his head as he removed the weapon from the holster. "The M stands for Military which means it can fire the 9x19mm round. They also made a civilian model called the -Z, but in Italy it fires the 9x21mm Israeli-round. Do you know why?"

"In Italy, only the military may use 9x19mm Parabellum rounds," Claes replied and Michele again nodded in confirmation.

"This is my personal weapon," he said. "My father gave it to me when I was a boy and I took it with me when I joined the Aeronautica Militare. I don't carry it on missions, but every now and then I like to take it out and use it."

"The holster also acts as a butt-stock. The military version can fire single-shot or three-rounds per trigger pull," Claes noted.

"Yes it does," Michele said, impressed with her knowledge of the weapon. He attached the stock and set the selective-fire switch to three-round burst. He then took a firing position and fired off six three-round bursts.

The smell of gunpowder was very strong in Claes' nose and the tinkling sound of the brass seemed loud in her ears, even though it was far softer than the bark of the rounds as they cracked through the sound barrier on their way to the target. It all triggered strong memories in her, though she could not place when and where they came from.

When Michele turned around, he saw Claes standing before him with an expression of extreme seriousness on her face.

"May I hold it?" she asked. Michele nodded and handed it to her. The weapon just seemed to feel...right...in her hands as she held it. He watched her check the action, remove and reinsert the magazine, cock the weapon, and take a shooting stance.

"Have you fired this configuration before?" Michele asked.

"I don't think so," Claes said. "Is something wrong with how I am holding it?"

"On the contrary, your stance is perfect for target shooting with it."

"It seemed the proper way," Claes replied. She handed it back to Michele who placed it back in the holder and then re-wrapped it. Kara came up and the three made their way back outside.

"We can give you a lift back to the dorms," Kara informed Claes, pointing to the GEM (Global Electric Motorcars) e4 NEV electric cart they had driven over from the dorm with.

"Thank you," Claes said.

"Have you eaten?" Michele asked. Claes shook her head.

"Michele and I were going to visit a Trattoria in town that Giuseppe clued us in on," Kara stated. "Would you like to come with us?"

"Yes. Yes I would," Claes replied.

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"Okay, finished," Priscilla said as he applied the finishing touches of make-up to Claes. It was the morning of the flight to Geneva and both she and Petra had worked with the make-up and hair to refine the look Claes had at Piedmont.

Claes stood up and went over to examine herself in the mirror. She was dressed in a miniskirt of dark-denim with knee-high tan leather flat boots and a red short-sleeved Ferrari polo. With her hair style and makeup, she looked to be in her mid-teens.

Kara wore a tan business blazer over a white dress and tan knee-length skirt. Beside her, Henrietta wore her schoolgirl uniform with white socks and brown loafers.

There was a knock on the door and Giuseppe was standing in the doorway.

"Are we about ready?" he asked. The girls nodded and grabbed their suitcases. They all filed out to the front of the building where a Fiat Ulysee minivan pulled up. The driver got out and opened the back and helped the girls load their suitcases and the travel trunk with their weapons, radios and other items. They then all piled in and headed off to the airport.

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The minivan exited the Grande Raccordo Anulare at the Superstrada no. 7 exit and drove out to the Argos VIP aircraft handling terminal at Rome Ciampino Airport 15km southeast of the city center where they were greeted by a staffer as they exited.

"Your plane is ready, Signore Pagani," the staffer said and escorted them through the sterile area and out onto the tarmac where Michele's Piaggio Aero P.180 Avanti was parked. The plane was white with stripes of Rosso Corsa – Italian "Racing Red". Next to the door were two small logos – one was for Scuderia Ferrari and the other was for the FC Barcelona professional soccer team. In black letters along the base of the tail was the plane's registry of I-WOLF. Michele walked around the nose to perform the pre-flight physical check while Kara stepped aboard.

"Welcome aboard Pagani Airlines Flight One with non-stop service to Geneva, Switzerland," she greeted. As they climbed aboard, they saw that the plane was quite wide and tall inside. A two-place divan was directly in front of the door against the starboard wall and beside the door on the port wall was a cabinet with drawers and doors. Farther down the cockpit were two sets of plush leather single seats facing each other. All of the seats were upholstered in a soft cream-colored leather and the walls were an egg-shell white with rosewood and brass trim. The carpet was a very thick natural pile that one's feet sank into with each step.

Henrietta and Giuseppe each took one of the aft pair of seats and Claes took the one facing across from Henrietta. Kara made sure they were all properly strapped in with the three-point harnesses and showed them where the life vests were and explained how the supplementary oxygen system would work. In the interim, Michele had completed his pre-flight check and had boarded the plane. A groundscrewman raised the lower half of the door while Michele closed

and secured the upper half. He then headed for the cockpit.

After she had settled everyone in back Kara came forward and settled into the co-pilot seat where she helped Michele with the pre-departure checklist. After that, she started first the port and then the starboard engine and verified that everything looked good for departure.

Kara set the radio to 121.75. "Ciampino ground, this is India-Whiskey-Oscar-Lima-Foxtrot. Ready to taxi."

"India-Whiskey-Oscar-Lima-Foxtrot, Ciampino tower. Clear to taxi to Runway 15. Position and hold short. Contact tower on 120.5."

Kara acknowledged and taxied the plane to the edge of the runway entrance. She received take-off clearance from the tower and advanced the throttles to full power momentarily as she taxied out onto the runway, checking the displays, then backing off. Everything looked good so she looked to Michele, who nodded his head. She advanced the throttles to full power again and started the take-off roll.

The Avanti quickly picked up speed and in just under one thousand meters was rotating on her rear undercarriage and climbing into the clear blue sky.

"India-Whiskey-Oscar-Lima-Foxtrot, contact Rome ATIS departure on 121.85," came the call from the tower.

"121.85, India-Whiskey-Oscar-Lima-Foxtrot. Ciao!" Kara said and reached for the radio tuning knob.

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"Go back and take care of our guests," Michele ordered once they had leveled off at their 12,000 meter cruising altitude.

"Aye, sir. You have control," Kara said.

"I have control," Michele acknowledged.

Kara slid back the seat and climbed out. A few minutes later, Giuseppe stuck his head in.

"Everyone settled?" Michele asked.

"Yes. Kara's serving refreshments," Giuseppe said.

"Have a seat," Michele invited, indicating the co-pilots seat. Giuseppe nodded and slipped into the seat.

"Nice ride," he noted.

"Thanks."

"So..." Giuseppe continued. "If you don't mind me asking, how does a fellow with your money end up working for a secret government counterterrorist organization as handler to a cyborg assassin? You obviously aren't doing it for the pension."

"No," Michele chuckled. "After two years running around Kosovo, Giulio Draghi ran into me one night at a bar and offered me a position in Public Safety. My father instilled in me a strong desire to serve the Republic, but I put that aside to pursue my passion for auto racing. However, when I was sent to Kosovo, those old talks we had came forward and I found that the Brotherhood of Arms had as much camaraderie as did a Formula One race team. When I left active military service, I found that I still wanted to serve, so I took him up on the offer. When Section 2 was created to start the cyborg project I was called in to offer some opinions."

"How long have you known about Section 2?" Giuseppe asked.

"Since the beginning," Michele admitted. "I was there when they converted Angelica and Triela. I've helped prepare the documentation for each of the girls since my position allowed me to hide their true functions and identities from other government agencies."

"And they let you stay in Public Safety?" The surprise was evident in Giuse's voice. "Even knowing all that?"

"My skills were more valuable where I was and they could keep an eye on me there just as well as they could if I was in Special Operations," Michele noted. "Plus, I didn't really fit the model for a fratello as they were then defined. I didn't have a grudge against the Five Republics Coalition and after what I'd seen happen to Angelica and Triela, I wasn't sure I wanted to be part of that, anyway, when they expanded the program later."

"What changed your mind?"

"When Elsa and Lauro were ambushed, it was decided to leverage the work Claes had been doing on the enhanced biomechanics on girls 15-17 to create a new tranche of cyborgs to compliment the original ten. They wanted handlers with different backgrounds than those of you paired with the Gen 1 models. They were also afraid of some of the leaks that were getting out about the program, so they decided to choose folks from within the SWA. As such, they drew Alessandro and I from Public Safety and he got his Russian duchess and I, Kara."

"Alessandro is certainly...different...in how he relates to Petrushka," Giuse noted.

"His training is definitely unconventional, I will admit. However, that is in part because of the difference in the conditioning. Your cyborgs are programmed to love you unconditionally," Michele noted. "I see it in their eyes every time I walk by - they're just waiting for me to give them an order to carry out. In the case of the new generation, that love is not present. Instead, they've been instilled to feel loyalty towards us and the Agency."

"For having a girl the same age as Petrushka, you seem a little casual about it all..."

"Our girls real-life peers are also 15-17 and girls that age act differently than the 11-13 year olds that are the peers of your girls. Kara walking around in a frilly dress with a parasol and teddy bear would be as out of place as Henrietta in a leather miniskirt and Doc Martens."

Giuse shuddered at the mental image of Henrietta that flashed into his mind.

"So Kara wears make-up, dresses in Giorgio Armani and Prada, and carries a cell phone and iPod everywhere she goes," Michele continued. "I've been able to keep Alessandro's...suggestions...at least somewhat in check. But her peers in the agency are the older girls, so I have to expect they are going to have an influence on her, though I do wish she'd take after Triela a bit more," he added with a smile.

"Don't we all," Giuse laughed. "It just seems..."

"Wrong?" Michele asked and Giuseppe nodded his head.

"The age of consent in Italy is 14 and Kara is 17 and Petrushka is 16."

And Triela was close to 14 when the agency put her into the program and that was years ago. Almost all the girls are chronologically over 14, but because of the augmentation, they don't really seem to age so even though we live with them day in and day out for years, we think of them as much younger than they are because their physical attributes are static. They don't grow physically because of the artificial legs and arms and the growth inhibitors we pump into them, but they do grow mentally."

Giuseppe nodded.

"Take Claes for example," Michele continued. "She may have the body of a 12-year-old girl since that was when she was first augmented, but she's 15 chronologically which is what the passport she is carrying says. And yet, because of the conditioning and memory wiping we do to them, she doesn't have the depth of experience a 15 year old girl should, especially when it comes to emotional development.

"With Kara, being Asian she looks anywhere from 15 to 25 depending on the outfit and makeup. Everyone in the Ministries of Defense and Interior thinks she's at least 21 because when she accompanies me on official business she's in a business suit. So it will be easy to pass her off as my assistant. But even with the selective conditioning and memory wipes we employed, emotionally she would have a hard time passing as 21 amongst a group of women that age."

Giuseppe sighed. "It's the opposite for me. Henrietta has a very well-defined emotional response to me that I can't seem to dissuade her of without being cruel."

"Just don't turn her into a machine like your brother did with Rico," Michele said. "Kara really likes her and I admit to finding her earnestness more endearing than annoying."

"Want to trade operatives?" Giuse said with a smile.

"Get me a coke, will you please?" Michele growled, though he was smiling. He activated the radio. "Good morning Geneva Center, this is India-Whiskey-Oscar-Lima-Foxtrot with you at Flight Level 120."

Giuse patted him on the arm and exited the cockpit. A few minutes later Claes appeared, a tall glass two-thirds-filled with ice and coke in her hand.

"Thank you," Michele said. "Have a seat."

Claes shook her head. "I can see better from here if that is okay."

"We've just crossed into Switzerland. Down to your right is Lake Maggiore and the town of Piedmont."

Claes leaned over the back of the co-pilot's seat and craned her neck. "The whole world looks so small from up here," she noted. "The water is so pretty. Geneva is on a lake, is it not?"

"Yes. It shares it's name with the city. I was thinking of renting a sailboat if we have some free time."

"Do you sail?"

"Yes," Michele said. "It's very peaceful out there, the sound of the water rushing past the hull and the wind in the sail fabric. The smell of brine in the air."

"That sounds nice," Claes agreed.

"We can ditch the others and play hooky out on the lake," Michele joked.

"I would like that," Claes said, though she wasn't joking.

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Claes contented herself to looking out the windows at the scenery until Kara re-appeared about 30 minutes later and took the co-pilot's seat to prepare for the final approach to Geneva Cointrin International Airport. At that time, Claes went back into the main cabin and took her seat.

"Geneva Approach, this is India-Whiskey-Oscar-Lima-Foxtrot passing 8000 meters for 6000," Kara called out.

"India-Whiskey-Oscar-Lima-Foxtrot, Geneva Approach. Descend and maintain 4000."

"India-Whiskey-Oscar-Lima-Foxtrot, contact Cointrin Tower on 119.7," came the call about ten minutes later.

Kara acknowledged and made contract.

"India-Whiskey-Oscar-Lima-Foxtrot, Cointrin Tower. Runway Two-Three, cleared to land. Following a British Airways Airbus A319. Six mile final. Caution wake turbulence."

"Traffic in site. Cleared to land Runway Two-Three. India-Whiskey-Oscar-Lima-Foxtrot." Kara called.

Less than ten minutes later they were on the ground.

"India-Whiskey-Oscar-Lima-Foxtrot, exit Runway Two-Three at Taxiway Charlie. Contact Ground on 118.7"

Kara did so and taxied the plane to the TAG Aviation Flight Center on the south apron and shut-down. She and Michele went through the post-flight checklist and then first Kara and then Michele exited the cockpit. Claes was in the right-hand back seat, pulling on her boots. Henrietta and Giuseppe were sitting next to each other on the divan at the front. Kara went past them to secure the aft lavatory while Michele swung open the upper cabin door, followed by dropping the lower cabin door (which had an integrated set of stairs).

Michele saw a Swiss customs officer and another gentleman in a suit approach the plane.

"Mister Pagani," the gentleman in the suit introduced himself, "my name is Marcel with TAG Aviation. If you would like to follow me to the lounge your car should be here shortly. This gentleman will handle your entry into Switzerland."

Giuseppe and Henrietta exited the plane, followed by Kara.

"Claes, one moment please," Michele said as she started for the door.

"Let me see your sidearm," he ordered. Claes did so, checking the safety and handing it to him with the muzzle pointed at herself. Michele opened a cabinet and tossed it inside the enclosed safe before closing and locking the door.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

"I know you don't want to fire a gun," Michele replied.

"Yes, I made a promise to someone that I would not be mean when I

wore these glasses," she stated. "But I now realize that is selfish of me. What if something goes wrong and one of you were injured because I failed to act?"

"We can take care of it. Do not worry."

She started to protest again, but Michele put his finger over her lips and shook his head.

"Claes, a promise is not something you keep only when it is convenient to do so. It is when it is most difficult that keeping a promise has the strongest meaning. You keep those glasses on and you stay a kind person."

Claes nodded and started down the stairs.

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They all walked into the TAG terminal where Michele handed over the paperwork and everyone's passports to the Swiss Customs Officer, who applied the proper stamps and then welcomed them to Switzerland with a tip of his hat before he left.

"Your car is ready," Marcel noted and they went out front where a Rolls Royce Phantom Pullman limousine was waiting for them. Kara went for the front passenger seat while the other four stepped into the back and each took one of the four leather seats.

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The Rolls pulled up to the front of the Hotel des Bergues on the Quai des Bergues. The hotel fronted Lake Geneva and offered beautiful views of the lake from tall windows and a balcony.

The doorman rushed down and opened the rear door, tipping his hat as the occupants stepped out. Kara exited on her own, standing by and waiting for Michele to step out.

They walked inside and admired the large and ornate lobby.

"Michele Nikolaiovich Pagani. I knew you'd done well in the American stock market, but I am impressed at how well you evidently did," a female voice called out clearly from the other side of the lobby.

Michele turned to see a tall and attractive Russian woman in her mid-thirties approaching him, a large smile on her face. At her side was a

Russian male in his mid-to-late teens, dressed in a loose-fitting suit.

"Nadia Sergeyeovich Petrovna," Michele said, surprised. They embraced and she gave him a peck on each cheek. "It's been, what, five years?"

"Almost," Nadia said. "Too long, my friend. And who is those lovely young women next to you?" she asked.

"Forgive me. Allow me to introduce my daughter, Claes. And this is my assistant, Kara Deleroux."

"Daughter? I didn't know you were married," Nadia said, surprised. She put her hand out and Claes took it.

"Adopted," Michele noted. "A number of years ago. I just felt the need to be a father."

"Ah. She didn't look Italian, though she does have your hair and eyes," Nadia said. "This is my nephew, Aleksi Komechinkov." The young man came forward and bowed slightly, which Michele returned. Neither Michele nor Kara missed him examining Claes, though she seemed to.

"We just finished lunch in the restaurant. A bit different fare for us Russians, but I think you will be pleased," she noted.

"I chose this hotel in part because the restaurant, Il Lago, does excellent northern Italian fare," Michele admitted.

"Well we must do dinner while you are here. I'm staying in Room 304."

"We're in the Rousseau Suite," Michele said and again Nadia nodded approvingly. They embraced again and Nadia and Aleksi stepped outside and into a waiting cab.

"You two seem close," Kara noted. Michele chose not to answer her, but she did detect a sparkle in his eyes as he went to the Front Desk and checked in.

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As they entered from the foyer, everyone stopped to admire the Rousseau Suite on the top floor. It had a tall ceiling with large windows and doors that opened out onto eight balconies that overlooked Lake Geneva, Ile Rousseau, the Jet d'Eau fountain and the city proper. The décor was pastel tones of beige, reflecting the design

of architect Pierre-Yves Rochon. At one end was the Master Suite where Michele was staying and on the other was the second bedroom, which Giuseppe would occupy. An interconnecting door in that bedroom led to the second room that Kara, Claes and Henrietta would share. In between the two bedrooms was a large living room area with a sectional couch and a dining room with six chairs.

"Who was that woman in the lobby?" Giuseppe asked.

"Nadia Petrovna, formerly with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and now with their Federal Security Service," Michele replied. "We met as part of the Kosovo Diplomatic Observer Mission in July 1998 and ended up working together. When the Kosovo Verification Agreement was signed that October, we were tasked to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and named to the Kosovo Verification Mission. Then we both ended up as part of the Rambouillet Conference talks, but when Russia and Serbia refused to sign the Accords, they pulled all the OSCE monitors and NATO started bombing the next day. I was sent to the front and Nadia went back to Russia. When the NATO Kosovo Force went in with the Russians, we came into contact again to iron out the chain of command, at which time I was released from active duty. This was the first time I have seen her since."

"And her nephew?"

"Nadia does have an older sister who'd be just over 40 now, so I could see her having a son of Aleksis's age."

There was a knock on the door and two bellhops appeared with their luggage on carts.

"Ok everybody, unpack your suitcases while I order us up some brunch."

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That evening, Claes stood before the mirror, adjusting her necklace.

"You look nice," Kara noted. Claes examined the sleeveless white dress with blocks of multi-colored stripes and shrugged. She went to the bed and sat down, slipping on a pair of white patent leather ballet slippers.

"Are you okay?" Kara asked, taking a seat on the other bed.

It was difficult for Claes to phrase the questions she wanted to ask. First, she was a relatively private girl. Second, while she liked Kara, she did view her as sometimes trying to force her friendship. And third, her questions related to Kara's handler and some of the girls were very protective of their handler's image.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but I sometimes think Michele feels sorry for me and that he is nice to me for that reason. And that upsets me," Claes admitted, her head down. "He's helped me expand the vegetable garden and he lets me read the books in his library and offered recommendations of other books based on what I am reading. I appreciate all of that, but if he does it only because he feels sorry for me, I wish he wouldn't be nice to me and just ignore me. I'm suspicious when people show me measured friendliness."

"I think Michele feels sorry for all of us," Kara noted. Claes raised her head to look at her.

"I sometimes see it in his eyes, especially when we're at the firing range or training grounds," she continued. "There is a sadness there as he watches us work. As if he wished it wasn't happening, or that he regretted us being here. He also argues with Marco about how the latter treats and trains Angelica."

"Why would he care how another handler treats their cyborg?" Claes asked.

"I guess it is because he has known her for so long. He does feel close to her," Kara noted. "But perhaps he argues with all the handlers and I don't hear about the others. He and Giuseppe are friends, though. And Henrietta would likely not stay quiet if Michele - or any handler, for that matter - said something unkind about Giuseppe," she noted with a smile.

"I admit I don't understand his sadness," Kara added. "Why should he be sorry for us? We all owe the Agency our lives. They saved us from dying of disease or injury and gave us strong, healthy bodies. You would think he'd be happy for us."

"Henrietta once asked me if I was lonely, since I didn't have a handler and never went outside the compound," Claes noted. "But I am not. When you are all away, I have plenty of books to read and I can paint or play music. I've always enjoyed cooking and you and Michele have both helped me try new dishes and new cuisines. But sometimes, the

most fun just comes from doing nothing. Lying in the grass under a sunny sky, enjoying the smells and breeze. Or sitting in the courtyard with my eyes closed, listening to the water flow in the fountain. I think my father told me that once.”

“Do you think it strange I don’t have a handler?” Claes asked a few minutes later.

Kara shrugged. “I’ve never thought about it, to be honest. I know you tested the improved biomechanics that they put in me. I just figured that was why you were here. In a way, you helped make me possible,” Kara said with a smile.

“Maybe that is why Michele is nice to me,” Claes noted.

“Michele is nice to all the girls,” Kara said matter-of-factly. “It’s just the type of person he is. Don’t take it personally.”

“He took my gun away so I wouldn’t have to use it on the mission,” Claes stated. “Even though he knew it might cause him trouble with Jean or the Director if they found out.”

“Why would he do that?” Kara asked.

Claes slipped off her glasses and held them before her.

“As a cyborg, I have perfect sight. And the lenses are just optical quality glass, completely transparent. Wearing them is like looking through a window. There is no reason to own them, much less wear them. And yet, they are incredibly special to me. I almost took Petrushka’s head off when I saw her trying them on in the showers. My body acted instinctively and I knocked her down and took them off her.

“I do not remember the person who gave me these glasses. But I do remember that I made a promise with them that I would never be mean. That I would just be a quiet, shy girl. Somehow, Michele found out about that so he took my gun so I could remain a ‘nice’ girl. And yet I broke that promise when I attacked Petra. Attacked her for wearing the glasses that were the basis for the promise I made in the first place.

“And then there was the incident in Piedmont. I pulled out my pistol and put it next to the woman’s head, but I couldn’t pull the trigger,

even though I knew I had to. Even as she tried to first shoot and then stab me, I could not fire. And then all I could do was try and block her attacks because I hesitated and didn't kill her when I had the chance. Fortunately, Petrushka had her M4 with her and was able to disable both of them."

She fell back on the bed, her arms spread wide to each side. "I am an assassin who can't bring herself to actually assassinate anyone. All because of a stupid promise I can't really remember with someone who I can't even recall."

Kara snorted. "I didn't think you were the type to wallow in melodrama," she said, hotly.

Claes raised her head.

"You're a cyborg, Claes, just like myself and the other girls. We were created for one purpose – to protect the Republic from threats foreign and domestic. But that doesn't mean we're all psychopaths. You may not be a field operative and you may not have a handler, but you are trained and conditioned just like the rest of us. Wearing a totem like those glasses is not going to override that."

"I didn't mean to imp..." Claes started, but Kara cut her off with a glare.

"Michele told me the most important thing is to know *when* to shoot, not *how* to shoot," Kara stated. "He has drilled into me the need to think before I pull the trigger. To be sure of each shot before I take it.

"As a second generation model, I was programmed to kill without thought or remorse. It's what makes me an effective operative. However, Michele does not want me to be a mindless automaton. He wishes me to be a thinking, feeling person who will take a life without hesitation when it is required, but whom also understands the gravity of committing to that decision. He has worked hard to override that programming to make me no less effective a soldier, but also no less a human being."

Kara's words resonated inside Claes' head, sparking memories of similar words once spoken to her by someone she only saw as a hazy figure.

"There are no pacifists in Special Operations, Claes. And whomever

you made that promise with knew that. They did not give you those glasses so you would be incapable of hurting someone. I believe that they gave them to you as a way to help you keep hold of your humanity through the conditioning and training. Just as Michele tries to do with me.”

“I wonder if that is the wise course of action,” Claes asked.

“His heart is bigger than his chest at times,” Kara noted. “That he took the gun from you is an example of that. Unlike the Gen1’s, I am not pre-programmed to have feelings of affection towards him; just to be loyal to him and protect him from harm. And yet, I see the same prerogatives in his eyes when he looks at me. I’m programmed to take a bullet for him, and yet I know he would do the same for me, even though I am armored and he is not.”

“You love him,” Claes said.

“I can’t help but have strong feelings for someone who cares for me that much, programming or conditioning notwithstanding. And I try my hardest to live up to his expectations of me,” Kara replied. She stood and walked over to the open window and looked outside on the lights of Geneva.

“You had a history before you came here, Claes. We all did. But that history was wiped clean before we woke up in our new bodies for the first time.”

“Doesn’t that bother you?” Claes asked. “To have no memories. No past.”

“Why would I want to remember sad memories? My parents died when I was young and I spent years in the French child protection system. And then I was terribly injured in some accident and Michele saved me and brought me here.”

“To be a weapon,” Claes noted.

“To be a protector,” Kara countered.

“I do have memories, Claes. My features are Japanese due to my mother, but my parents lived in France. And when Michele took me to Paris for New Years, looking down on the city from the top of the Eifel Tower, I recognized buildings and areas, even though I had not been

to Paris since joining the Agency. As we walked the Left Bank, I recalled certain architectural details, even certain smells. I don't know if they are memories the medical team let me keep, or if they are ones the conditioning failed to erase."

Kara closed the window.

"There are times you will need to respond to violence with violence, Claes. You are not 'mean' when you do so. You are just being human. And I believe whomever you made that promise with knew that. Michele's intentions may have been good, but he was wrong to take your weapon as it reinforced in your mind that you cannot take action against someone without breaking your promise. And you were wrong to let him take your gun. It does you credit to try and honor the ideals of the promise, but you can't live up to that person's ideals if you are dead."

Henrietta appeared at the door. "That's a beautiful dress, Kara," she noted.

"You like it?" Kara said as she did a twirl. She was dressed in a sleeveless steel-gray silk sheath dress with tonal geometric print and black patent-leather boots.

"Michele and Giuseppe want to know if you're ready for dinner?" Henrietta asked as she sat down in a chair and slipped on a pair of black flats to go with the white dress that Giuseppe had bought her for the mission.

Kara nodded and came over to the bed. She put out her hand for Claes, who took it and let Kara pull her up to a sitting position and then up off the bed.

"I'm sorry, Kara," Claes said as she grabbed her tan leather swing coat off the back of the chair.

"No worries," Kara replied. "I'll still let you have a bite of my cheesecake."

"I love cheesecake," Henrietta noted.

"Yes, we've seen you at the dessert table. Be careful though, 'Etta. You eat too much and that jacket from Giuse won't button anymore," Kara said with an evil grin.

"That's mean!" Henrietta cried.

---

They all made their way downstairs and to the Il Lago restaurant where they had a nice dinner. Afterwards, they visited Le Bar des Bergues where they sat outside and enjoyed coffee and liqueurs as the sun set.

"Good evening, Michele Nikolaiovich," Nadia Petrovna greeted as she and Aleksii stepped out onto the terrace. Aleksii was in a tuxedo and Nadia was in a fine evening gown.

"We just returned from Xavier Dayer's one-act opera *Mémoires d'une jeune fille triste* at the Grand Théâtre de Genève," she noted as Michele and Giuseppe stood up.

"Would you like to join us for a digestif?" Michele invited.

"That's very kind of you, Michele Nikolaiovich, but we were planning to retire to our room for dinner. Perhaps tomorrow? I hear the terrace at Le Chat-Botté in the Hôtel Beau-Rivage is excellent."

"I think that will work nicely," Michele said.

"Reservations for seven at seven?" Nadia suggested and Michele nodded his head.

"Then I bid you all a good evening," Nadia said. Michele and Giuseppe waited for them to exit the terrace before they sat back down.

They finished their drinks and paid the bill. They then exited through the bar and checked the area of the Royal Suite where Lompar was staying. The suite was rumored to use bullet-proof glass, so a sniper shot was out of the question, necessitating a more risky infiltration operation. They already knew he was attending a function off-site, so they decided this was the perfect time to perform some reconnaissance of the room in his absence.

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"All clear in the hall," Michele noted from just outside the stairwell.

"The rooms are still dark," Giuseppe added from outside.

"Front entrance clear," Henrietta reported from the lobby.

Kara and Claes approached the door to the Royal Suite. Kara removed from her purse a small device with a card attached to one end via a cable. She put the card into the door lock and activated the machine. Within moments, it triggered the lock and they opened the door, quickly moving inside.

"We're in," Kara noted. Both turned on infrared "flashlights" which allowed the infrared photoreceptors in their cybernetic eyes to see in the ambient darkness without needing to either use the room lights or give themselves away with traditional flashlights. It also allowed them to detect many sensor beams used in alarms.

"You take the living room and master bedroom while I check the office and beyond," Kara said. Claes nodded. They didn't expect to find anything obviously incriminating – Lompar didn't get as powerful as he did by making simple mistakes. However, a floor plan off the hotel's website was one thing and actual information was another. Kara took out a digital camcorder that worked with infrared light and started filming, making her way to the office area. She quickly found the safe, a standard hotel unit that used a digital keypad with a four-digit user-created key. Such a device allowed up to 10,000 combinations. She was programmed with the 100 most common combinations as modeled by behavior scientists. She first tried various combinations of Lompar's month, day and year of birth, but none hit. Next, she tried the room number followed by 1-9. When that didn't work, she tried it in reverse, but again was unsuccessful. She tried the first two dozen common combinations with no success and decided to give up.

Claes came in from where she had been working searching and filming the master suite and living room. The two of them started walked through the dining room and into the parlor. Kara looked inside the bathroom in back while Claes approached the closet at the end of the hall. Kara heard Claes open the closet door and heard her exclamation almost at the same time she saw her shadow fall into the bathroom as the hall light went on. Kara turned, going for the pistol in her belt. As she did, she heard Claes' voice express surprise as she uttered a single word.

"Aleksi!"

As she completed her turn, Kara saw that Aleksi Komechinkov had a Yarygin PYa pistol pointed at Claes' head. His face suddenly reflected

surprise and he tilted the gun up, enabling the safety.

"Michele, we've got a problem," Kara reported into her microphone as she pointed her own weapon at the ground.

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"So what is the interest the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation has in Franjo Lompar?" Michele asked.

After their mutual discovery, Kara, Claes and Aleksii extricated themselves and returned to Michele's suite where they were soon joined by Nadia.

"I could ask the same about the Italian Public Welfare Agency, Michele Nikolaiovich," Nadia noted with a smile from the couch.

"Ladies first," Michele said. "And please, you can drop the patronymic," he added.

"As you recall from our time together in Kosovo, Lompar did a brisk business in smuggling arms and other goods to the pro-Serbian forces. Since we supported the Serbians in that conflict, we...looked the other way...on some of the other things he did," Nadia noted.

"Unfortunately, Lompar became bolder as he became richer and more powerful. He started smuggling drugs and people and then moved on to trafficking in humans to Western Europe. This included adult and child prostitution, forced labor and servitude, and illicit international adoption along with...other uses." Nadia couldn't hide the revulsion in her eyes as she said the last phrase. "He draws mostly from Russia and Eastern Europe, though his contacts in Algeria have evidently given him access to Algerians, Tunisians and Sudanese for those who prefer more...variety.

"He secretly re-sold our weapons to the rebels who created the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. When we went in to re-take the region in 1999, Lompar again was willing to sell weapons and explosives to the guerrilla resistance. We also have proof of him meddling in Ossestia and Abkhazia on behalf of the Georgians, who are resisting our efforts to re-integrate those regions into the Motherland. The man has no morals and will do anything for money. While he was useful to us in the past, he has since outlived that usefulness and my superiors have decided it is time he be 'put out to pasture' as the Americans like to say. We've just been waiting for the right time," she concluded.

"And now is that time?" Giuseppe asked her.

"At it appears to be for you, as well," Nadia observed.

"We know he's been funding operations and smuggling in drugs, weapons and explosives to the Five Republics and their sympathizers," Giuseppe admitted. "We know his interest is not in helping Padania gain independence for the north, but instead to mine it for profits as the Mafia have done in the south of Italy. As such, he's supporting the more brazen and dangerous members of the PRF, as well as individuals who are in it for the profit potential and not political beliefs.

"All that being said, why did they send you, Nadia?" Michele asked. "The FSB has plenty of commandoes in the UBMT who could do the job."

"There is...dispute...within the FSB about how to deal with him," Nadia admitted. "Some in the SKR and SZKSiBT have long...histories...with him and have made a good deal of money from that relationship. His smuggling operations have also won him many...patrons...in the Border Guard Service. Others feel that he can be...reformed...and put back to work helping us. Some in that group want to use his knowledge of Georgian actions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to help Russian interests in returning those areas to our control.

"However, my boss in the CSNSPUT feels he is too much of a danger and sent Aleksi and I to eliminate him. He has the permission of the Directors of SZKSiBT and the SEhB to do so and that is enough to shield us whether the mission succeeds or fails."

"I'm sorry, but all these acronyms are going over my head," Claes said. Henrietta and Giuseppe also had mostly blank looks on their faces. Michele looked to Kara.

"SEhB is the Economic Security Service. One of their duties is to fight smuggling and drug trafficking," Kara began. "SZKSiBT is the Service to Protect the Constitutional System and Combat Terrorism. They perform counterterrorist operations within and outside Russia. I am not familiar with your group, however," Kara said to Nadia.

"Many are not," Nadia noted. "Though your knowledge of the internal FSB structure is impressive. You have trained her well, Michele," she complemented. "CSNSPUT is the Special Antiterrorist Center. We

specialize in what you could say are 'non-traditional' counter-terror responses. Much like your own Section 2," she added, with a nod to the girls.

"You're very perceptive, Nadia," Michele said. "But then, I remember you were a quick study back in Kosovo."

"As I recall, it was one of those traits you found so endearing in me during our time together, my dear Michele," she noted with a smile, earning both of them a questioning look from everyone else in the room.

"Yes, Michele, we are aware of your program using young girls as special operatives," she continued. "The SKR, that's our Counterintelligence Service for the rest of you, first started picking up rumors about it around six months ago from Five Republics chatter. They do not appear to know the specifics, but they do know that they exist."

"And while we have been out of touch for all these years, we do still travel in the same broad circles, Michele. Word of your work with Interpol, Europol, and other agencies has filtered back to me. I know you've been working for the Social Welfare Agency since you left Kosovo in their Public Safety division until last year, when you started identifying yourself with the Special Operations group."

She inclined her head towards Claes. "Your...daughter. She is an operative?"

"Yes," Michele said, earning him a sharp look from Giuseppe.

"So you are also Claes' handler?" Aleksi asked. Michele nodded. To their credit, neither Kara nor Claes showed surprise at Michele's deception.

"I can tell from how the little one always stays close to the gentleman that he must be her handler, no?" Nadia asked.

"Yes. Her name is Henrietta," Giuse replied, seeing no reason to play dumb. "And my name is Giuseppe Croce."

"Pleased to meet you both," Nadia said.

"Aleksi serves a similar purpose for us," Nadia noted. "His performance

and abilities have been honed through a highly-advanced training program combined with physical and mental conditioning. For example, he can punch with a force of over 7000 kilopascals. We've enhanced his mental chronometry to improve his reaction times to stimuli as well to support enhancements to his physical reflex response. Combined with his military and security training, he's a highly effective operative," she noted with pride.

"Well, since we both are evidently here for the same purpose, I suppose we should pool our resources?" she noted. Michele looked to Giuse, who shrugged. "The more the merrier," he noted and Michele nodded.

"Proposal accepted," Michele said.

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As the meeting broke-up, Claes walked outside onto the balcony outside the dining to get some fresh air. The Jet d'Eau was brightly lit from below and the shore was awash in neon colors.

"I am sorry for pointing my gun at you," Aleksi apologized as he came up next to her.

"You just surprised me, that's all," Claes replied. "We thought the room was empty."

"As did I. You and Kara were very stealthy. It was not until you were in the office that I detected your presence," Aleksi noted.

"Come, Aleksi. We should return to our own room and order dinner," Nadia stated from inside.

Aleks took Claes' hand in his and kissed the top, bowing as he did so. "Good night, Miss Pagani," he said, heading back inside and saying his farewells to the others before following Nadia out.

"I think you might have an admirer," Kara noted from the adjoining balcony.

"Shut up, Kara," Claes growled, turning to face the lake again.

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Claes rose from her bed Thursday morning, shielding her eyes from the light coming in through the door to the terrace. Henrietta was still

sleeping on the rollaway and she saw Kara's bed was empty.

She looked around and saw Kara tying the laces of her running shoes. Her athletic wear was all black PUMA Ferrari products, including her tee-shirt, track pants and track jacket. Her shoes, though PUMA, did not have the Ferrari logo because PUMA didn't make one. She made up for that, however, with a pair of PUMA Ferrari leather driving shoes back at the compound.

"Good morning," she called out.

"Good morning, Claes," Kara replied.

"Going out?"

"Yes. I wanted to get in a run before my shower and breakfast."

"Would you like some company?" Claes asked.

"Sure."

Claes changed into a t-shirt, gym shorts and running shoes and they left their room and headed downstairs. They stepped out of the lobby and Kara took the lead. They jogged across the Pont du Mont Blanc spanning the Rhone and jogged along the Promenade du Lac along a waterfront park, on past the marina, and out into Lake Geneva and the Jet d'Eau via the Jetée des Eaux Vives. They stopped for a few moments at the end of the causeway to rest and enjoy the view of the Left Bank cityscape.

They returned back along the causeway and followed the Quai Gustave Ador back to the Pont du Mont Blanc. Instead of re-crossing there, they continued on down the waterfront to the Pont des Bergues which they took across to the Ile Jean-Jacques Rousseau. They stopped at a small café on the island and grabbed bottles of cool water.

"You're holding up really well," Kara noted to Claes. Both had a sheen of sweat on their brows.

"I don't do the heavy training you all do, but I am required to stay in shape for my testing," Claes noted. "And I admit I enjoy the solitude of running around the woods. It's quite beautiful, as well."

They walked along the edge of the island as they drank. They headed

back to the Pont des Bergues and crossed back to the Left Bank in front of their hotel.

They entered the suite and found Michele at the bar, working on his 12" PowerBook. There was a pitcher of fresh orange juice in ice and Kara poured a glass for herself and one for Claes.

"I was about ready to order breakfast," Michele noted, pushing over the in-room dining menu.

"Eggs Benedict and French Crêpes with milk and hot chocolate," Kara said after reviewing the menu, which she handed to Claes. "I'm going to borrow your shower," she added and headed into the master suite.

"I found a place that rents sailboats," Michele informed Claes. He turned the PowerBook around towards her.

"Les Corsaires. We jogged past them," she noted.

"I was thinking the Yngling," Michele said. "It is small enough for me to handle on my own, so you can just enjoy the water."

"It's only four people, though. Shouldn't we get the Soling? It seats six."

"Henrietta wants to take pictures with her camera, so she and Jean are going out on their own. And Kara is heading back to EBACE to attend some panels. So it's just you and I, if you are still interested."

"Yes, I am," she said and went into her room to take a shower.

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Claes and Michele took a taxi to Les Corsaires and were shown to their Yngling. Designed by the Swede Jan Linge, it was effectively a smaller (6.5m) version of his Soling keelboat. Like the Soling, the Yngling had a sleek hull form, a well-balanced rig and a responsive helm. It was designed for a crew of two to three, but Michele had enough experience to do it alone, especially as the breezes were mild.

They sailed out past the Jet d'Eau and through the breakwaters then along the eastern coast up past La Gabuille point before moving towards the west bank to stay within Swiss territorial waters.

Michele showed Claes some of the basics of sailing and she helped

steer the ship. Most of the time, however, she just enjoyed the experience of being on the water in such nice weather.

"Who is Raballo?" Claes asked Michele as they turned around off the coast of the municipality of Coppet and headed back to Geneva.

"Raballo? The name doesn't ring a bell," Michele said.

"Jean showed me a movie about wildlife and topography of northern Italy," Claes said. "It showed scenes of the Oglio tributary and Lake Ercavallo. In one of the scenes, a man was fishing for lake trout. As I watched it, it was so beautiful that I wanted to cry with the emotion of it, but no tears would come forth. When I was walking back to the dormitory, I passed the indoor shooting range and felt a strong pull to go inside. The man at the door recognized me from some earlier time. He said I used to visit with someone named Raballo."

"I'm sorry, Claes, but I don't know any Raballo currently in Special Operations," Michele said.

"You did the paperwork for all the cyborgs, correct?" she asked.

Michele nodded. "But to answer your next question before you ask it, I had nothing to do with the handlers. That was administered strictly within Section 2. My only job was to help get your cover stories and information into the official records. The only two handlers I knew before I joined last year was Marco and Hillshire. And when I was introduced to the rest, none was named Raballo and I was informed you did not have a handler."

"As I walked through the gun locker, I didn't recognize any of the weapons on the wall except for one. I looked it up later and it was German – a model MP5K made by Heckler & Koch," Claes said.

"The finest small arms manufacturers in the business," Michele opined.

"The man at the range said and I wore a hat from the Special Intervention Group and shot the Heckler & Koch VP pistol. I have a GIS hat in my room, but I don't remember where I got it. And when I held your VP70, it just felt right in my hands. And you noted my stance was the proper one."

"Kara and the other Gen 2's were programmed with weapons handling

and identification as part of their base conditioning," Michele noted. "Perhaps that same programming was tested on you and that is why you knew how to handle the gun?"

"But why wouldn't I recognize any of the other weapons on the wall?" Claes asked. "When I went down the stairs I heard a shot ring out and it frightened me. I peeked around the corner and realized I was in the shooting range. I saw Henrietta practicing with her pistol under Giuseppe's guidance. I only spoke with her and Giuseppe for a few moments before I left.

"As I walked towards the exit, the smell of gunpowder and the brass shells on the floor brought back wisps of memories that I couldn't quite grasp onto. Those same senses were even stronger when I watched you fire your pistol. When I returned to the dorm that first time, I suddenly felt an intense need to paint a scene of someone fishing. But, about a week later, I had a...nightmare, I guess you could call it."

"Nightmare?" Michele asked.

"I was back in the shooting range. I had some type of pistol with a butt stock and I was aiming it at Henrietta and Giuseppe. I think it was a VP70 like yours. Then someone hit it away. There was a bang and I woke up."

"Did you discuss it with Dr. Bianchi? Or Jean?" Michele asked. Claes shook her head.

"Did you ever have the dream again?" Michele asked. Again, Claes shook her head.

"Then it was probably just your imagination playing tricks with you," Michele noted. "Maybe you were upset at Henrietta for something and your mind just came up with something. Lord knows I've had strange dreams in my life."

Claes nodded and went back to watching the water.

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Later that afternoon, back in the hotel, Michele placed a call to Jean Croce.

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"You all look beautiful," Nadia complimented as the three girls came into the living room that evening. Kara wore a metallic copper silk dress with a purple belt and black pumps. Claes wore a dark grey scoop-neck dress matched with black and brown pointed-toe skimmers. Henrietta was wearing a white dress with black buttons down the left side with black patent leather opera flats.

"And the men are quite handsome, as well," she noted. Michele sported an Armani suit while Giuseppe chose Hugo Boss, both in black. Aleksí was sporting eveningwear from Dmitry Loginov.

"You're not so bad, yourself," Michele noted with a smile. Nadia was wearing a dress from Russian designer Masha Sharoeva that was white on top and black on the bottom.

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Since the Hotel Beau Rivage, which housed the restaurant Le Chat-Botté, was just up the street from their hotel, they decided to walk since the weather was pleasant.

They walked along the Quai du Mont Blanc, enjoying the view of Lake Geneva. When they reached the hotel, they stepped inside to the magnificent atrium. They were greeted by the maître d'hôtel, who escorted them to their table in out on the terrace. There, they were introduced to the head chef and the sommelier, who outlined the food and wine menu for the evening.

As befitting one of the finest French cuisine restaurants in Switzerland, the meal and the wines were exceptional. After dinner, the adults made their way to the Atrium Bar to have drinks while the three girls and Alexi settled around the huge fountain in the center of the atrium.

Kara stepped outside for some air and saw a Mercedes S500 Guard pull up. A bodyguard stepped out of the front passenger seat and the driver looked armed, as well. Two more came out of the lobby and took up position before each rear door, which then opened to allow Lompar and someone else to exit. The three guards screened Lompar and his guest as they walked into the hotel and went towards the elevators. The driver returned to the Benz and one of the valets slipped into the passenger seat to direct as the car drove off to the hotel parking entrance.

The elevator door opened and Henrietta followed them in. One of the

bodyguards told her in French to take another car, but she shook her head to indicate she didn't understand and then flashed him a smile. Not wishing to cause a scene, Lompar shook his head to stop the guard and the doors closed. Henrietta chose the fourth floor and the guard chose the second. The doors opened and Lompar and his party exited. As soon as the doors closed, Henrietta hit the button for the third floor. She then dashed down the hall to the staircase closest and went down them. She cracked the door open and saw a guard entering into the room while another took up position outside. She closed the door and went down to ground level and made her way to the atrium to report.

Michele excused himself from the bar for a moment and met Kara, who reported on Lompar's entrance and that he was in the second floor in the northeast tower. Michele instructed her to have Claes head outside and try and identify what room he was in and for her and Henrietta to return to their hotel and get the latter's FN P90 and their radios and bring them back.

Kara went down and handed Claes her compact Carl Zeiss binoculars and the instructions from Michele.

"I will go with you," Aleksi said. "It will look more natural for a young couple to be walking the waterfront."

"Are you armed?" Kara asked him. He shook his head.

"Let me have your pistol," Claes told Kara. After a moment's hesitation, Kara nodded and handed it over and Claes put it in her purse.

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"What is it?" Giuseppe asked.

"Kara said Lompar just went into a suite here at the hotel," Michele noted. "I've given Henrietta and Kara permission to try and go for a sniper shot from across the street." He turned to Nadia. "Aleksi and Claes are outside doing reconnaissance."

"We need to give ourselves an alibi. Let's pay up and take a taxi to the Hotel Intercontinental and make ourselves obvious at the Bar Les Nations."

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Claes and Aleksi walked down the steps and crossed the Quai du Mont Blanc to the park across the street from the hotel. They went underneath some trees and Claes took out the binoculars and started scanning the windows around the area Henrietta had said they were. She saw movement and noticed one of the doors on a terrace open and a man in a dark suit step out and put something to his eyes. Claes dropped her own glasses behind her.

"Put your arms around my shoulders," Aleksi said.

"What?"

"That guard has a light-sensitive scope. We need to look like a young couple to not attract attention."

Claes reluctantly did so. Aleksi held her for a minute and then relaxed. "He went back inside. Let's head over to the quay."

A slight breeze came in from the water and Claes shivered. She also realized that her heart was beating faster and she was a bit flush.

"Cold?" Aleksi asked, and Claes nodded. He removed his suit jacket and draped it over her shoulders. They sat on the quay in a shadowed area, Claes watching the terrace and Aleksi watching the passers-by.

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Kara and Henrietta entered their room at the Hotel de Bergues.

"Change into jeans, a shirt, and a jacket," Kara ordered. "I'll get the hardware."

"Yes, Kara," Henrietta acknowledged.

Kara first grabbed her Ferrari F1 travel bag. She then went to the a heavy-duty travel trunk they stored the FN P90 and XM8 rifles in plus other items. She typed in the password on the keypad and the internal latches released. She transferred the P90 and a clip of SB193 subsonic 5.7x28mm rounds into the Ferrari bag, wrapping it in a shooting blanket. She also grabbed Michele's P2000 SK to replace her own. She then added a second shooting blanket and three tactical radios with integrated earpieces along with the Gemtech SP90 sound suppressor for the P90.

"I'm ready, Kara," Henrietta said. She'd changed into dark chinos, a

dark polo and her loafers along with her red leather jacket.

“Excellent. Grab one of the Grieder les Boutiques shopping bags and put in one of the radios for Claes along with her opera jacket.”

Kara went into the room and changed out of her dress and into a black Ferrari polo and black jeans which she tucked into Armani riding boots. She grabbed the F1 bag and followed Henrietta out the door.

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“We’ve identified what room he’s in,” Claes noted when Henrietta handed her the shopping bag with her coat and radio in it, pointing out the second floor terrace and windows. She handed Aleksi his jacket back and put on her own. She then put the radio in a pocket and inserted the ear piece.

After making the delivery, Henrietta crossed the Rue Dr-Alfred-Vincent and rejoined Kara. They then entered the Hotel d’Angeterre and made their way to the stairwell, which they climbed to the roof access. Kara checked for any security devices and, finding none, picked the lock. They proceeded across the roof and set up a sniping location.

Kara laid out the first blanket for Henrietta to lay down on. She then unwrapped the FN90 and handed it to Henrietta, laying out the blanket for herself. Henrietta kept the gun and herself beneath the edge of the roof to prevent them from being observed from below or from the Beau Rivage, as the Hotel d’Angeterre was not that much taller and they were backlit a bit by the tall lighted hotel sign. However, they hoped the bright light from that sign would ruin the night vision of anyone glancing their way.

Kara removed a set of Carl Zeiss Conquest binoculars and carefully examined the rooms that Claes had told Henrietta were where Lompar was currently. She saw him inside sitting on a couch talking to someone. The terrace doors were slightly open to allow air flow.

She saw one of the guards came out and perform a quick sweep of the surrounding area with night-vision optics. She quickly ducked back below the edge of the roof.

“The guard has left and Lompar and his guest are coming out on to the terrace,” Claes called over the radio. “One of the guards has a small wooden box on a tray, and it looks like two brandy glasses and a bottle.”

"The box is likely a humidor," Kara said. "They're probably going to smoke cigars and have a brandy. This is our chance."

"Let's get set-up," Kara said to Henrietta. Henrietta positioned the rifle on the edge of the roof and started searching for the target area through her Schmidt & Bender scope. Kara took a small blanket whose edges were weighted in lead shot and placed it on the roof edge under the barrel. This would help catch any gunshot residue that was ejected and make it more difficult for a forensics team to identify where the shot was fired. The gun also had a high-strength nylon open-weave bag over the bolt area to catch spent cartridges.

Henrietta set the rotary dial fire control selector to position "1" for semi-automatic fire. Between the SB193 round and the SP90 suppressor, the performance of the round was compromised by close to 50%, but the target was less than 20m away so a solid kill was highly probable. And Henrietta was quick enough on the trigger to send a second or even third round if necessary.

Whether by fate, luck or just serendipity, Lompar took the seat with his back to their position. This meant that Henrietta had a clear shot to the lower part of his skull, which would improve the chances of a successful penetration and the infliction of a mortal wound, either by destroying the brain stem or severing the spinal cord.

"He's going to light the other guy's cigar in a moment, Henrietta," Kara noted. "When he does, you'll likely have some flare in your scope. Take the shot then." She hoped the glare from the lighter flame should mask whatever muzzle flash escaped.

Henrietta slowed her breathing and steadied the aiming reticle on the target. She knew he'd lean forward to light his companion's cigar, so she shifted the gun a little to the left to where she expected him to be when she was ready to take the shot.

Lompar's companion reached into the humidor and withdrew a cigar. He used a double guillotine-style cutter to snip the end and then leaned forward to allow Lompar to light it.

Across the street, Lompar's head moved almost directly into line. Henrietta made a slight adjustment, held her breath, and squeezed the trigger.

The 5.7x28mm bullet left the barrel at a speed of just under 300 meters per second. It took a fifteenth of a second to cross the 20 meters and bury itself in the base of Lompar's skull. The bullet passed through the lower occipital bone just below the base of the brain, slewing as it exited and tearing through the medulla oblongata as well as the vertebral and basilar arteries. The bullet continued forward, coming to a stop in the lower jaw. While she could not see the internal damage, Kara did witness Lompar spasm and then fall forward, totally limp. She successfully interpreted that as the signs of a fatal wound.

"That's a kill," Kara called out over the radio. Henrietta immediately withdrew behind the roof and Kara yanked the GSR blanket as she did the same.

"Guards are rushing the terrace," Claes called. "Hold station."

Henrietta and Kara stayed low against the edge of the roof.

"They've pulled Lompar inside. Exfiltrate now."

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Once they were safely out of site on the roof, Kara and Henrietta packed everything away, dusted themselves off, and headed back down the stairwell and to the outside. They returned to the Hotel de Bergues via back streets. And as soon as they had verified Kara and Henrietta were safely off the roof, Claes called Michele and said "Barcelona Wins", the code for a successful hit. She and Aleksi walked back to the Hotel de Bergues along the waterfront. Michele, Giuseppe and Nadia waited another forty minutes and then flagged a taxi back to the hotel.

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"Excellent work," Michele complemented when they were all together in the suite.

"Indeed," Nadia added. "A very successful partnership, Michele Nikolaiovich. We should do this again."

"You evidently know where to find me," Michele joked as he prepared himself a drink at the bar.

Nadia rose. "It is time for Aleksi and I to retire to our rooms. I must contact my superiors and let them know the mission is a success and then we must clean-up and change before heading to the airport to

catch our morning flight." She came over and kissed Michele on both cheeks. She shook hands with Giuseppe and the girls. Aleksi also shook hands with everyone.

After they had left, Giuseppe looked at Michele. "A very interesting woman."

"Indeed she is," Michele said, but he did not elaborate and Giuse didn't push. Michele opened his PowerBook and started preparing the report for Lorenzo. The girls went to sleep and Giuse and Michele followed soon after.

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The following morning everyone rose early and they ordered in breakfast while everybody prepared to depart. Henrietta and Giuseppe would take a high-speed train to Zurich and spend the weekend there before returning to Rome on Sunday evening.

Claes, Kara and Michele would fly the P.180 from Geneva to Nice Côte d'Azur Airport since it was the closest facility to the Principality of Monaco. The still air distance was just under 300km so from terminal to terminal it would take about an hour.

They were wheels-up just before 8.00 and were taxing to their parking stand fifty minutes later. They cleared customs (which applied to both France and Monaco) and were met out front by a chauffeured Maybach 62.

"What's a Maybach?" Claes asked.

"It's Daimler-Chrysler's top-end car. When BMW bought Rolls Royce, DC needed something equally exclusive to top their range, so they resurrected the Maybach brand. It's like an uber-Mercedes."

Claes and Michele slipped into the back, the doors closing automatically with the push of a button by the chauffer.

A silver tray with a silver bowl filled with macadamia nuts and cashews was on a tabletop with two crystal glasses.

"Okay, this is just ridiculous," Claes noted as she reclined her rear seat and extended the power footrest. She looked at one of the buttons. "Air conditioning? In the seats?" she exclaimed, shaking her head.

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Two large LCD displays in the back of the front seats showed a map of their journey, but once they climbed into the hills over Nice, Claes mostly looked out the window.

The drive to the Metropole Monte-Carlo hotel took about 50 minutes and soon they descended into Monte Carlo proper and the Hotel Metropole Monte-Carlo. They checked-in to their suite, which had a view of the Mediterranean.

"I took the liberty of booking us a private invitation to the Chef's Table at restaurant Joel Robuchon here in the hotel where the head chef will prepare us lunch."

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Twilight was just starting to fall over the Principality as the doorman greeted Michele, Kara and Claes as they stepped out onto the Avenue de la Madone in front of the hotel. They turned towards the harbor and walked to the Avenue des Spélugues and down past the Botanical Gardens before cutting through Casino Square along the Place du Casino. Their destination was the Restaurant Louis XV in the Hotel de Paris, holder of three Michelin stars.

As they walked in front of the famous Casino du Monte-Carlo, Kara admired the collection of exotic cars parked out front. Her eye was immediately drawn to the bright yellow Enzo Ferrari parked prominently and she walked towards it in reverent movements.

"I would sell my soul to have this car," Kara noted, and Claes believed she wasn't exaggerating. The way Kara stared at it, she almost expected her to genuflect.

"I don't care what Ferrari says – that is a pure track car," Michele noted. "That is why I didn't buy one."

"You could have bought the Maserati MC12 gran turismo," Kara noted. The MC12 used the same chassis, engine and gearbox as the Enzo Ferrari, just with different bodywork.

"The thought of driving a car five meters long and two meters wide, with a clearance measured in centimeters, in downtown Rome fills me with nothing but angst," Michele noted.

"This one is quite pretty," Claes said, pointing to a sleek exotic in a metallic bluish-green hue.

Michele followed her gaze and immediately made a sign warding against evil, causing Kara to stifle a laugh.

"What?" Claes asked.

"I'm sorry, I should have warned you," Kara said. "That is a 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Lamborghini Murciélago. Automobili Lamborghini was created in Sant'Agata Bolognese when the founder, Ferruccio Lamborghini, felt that Enzo Ferrari was building shoddy cars and decided he could do better. At the time, Lamborghini built tractors and, to many Ferrari purists, that heritage is a sign of their inferiority. That they are now owned by the German Audi company makes them even more suspect in some eyes."

"You certainly know a lot about Italian sports cars," Claes noted.

"I made the mistake of suggesting to Michele that he trade in the 456 for a Lamborghini Gallardo. He then proceeded to lecture me over the next three hours with the histories of Ferrari, Lamborghini, Maserati and Alfa Romeo. I was afraid he was going to test me on it, afterwards, so I committed it to memory."

They joined Michele standing before a silver and black car that was on a red carpet with velvet ropes directly in front of the Casino entrance.

"Bugatti...French, right?" Kara asked.

"Yes. This is a prototype they've been working on for a few years now, the 16.4 Veyron."

"And I thought the Rolls was luxurious," Kara exclaimed. The interior was completely swathed in leather outside of the center control stack, which was machined aluminum.

"Come take a look at this," Michele called from the back, where the engine cover was up. "That is an 8.0 liter W16 engine – two juxtaposed V8 engine blocks coupled to a single crankshaft. It is said to generate 1001 horsepower and be able to push the car to 407km/h."

"How much?" Claes asked. The performance numbers didn't mean anything to her, but the way Michele and Kara spoke of them, they must have been impressive. As such, she figured it was expensive.

"About one million Euros," Michele replied.

"The Enzo is cheaper," Kara noted with a smile. "So is the MC12, for that matter," she added.

"Let's move along ladies. We don't want to keep Chefs Ducasse and Cerutti waiting," Michele said. They walked past the rest of the cars and into the Hotel de Paris.

King Louis XV ruled France from the fabulous Palace de Versailles and as they were escorted into the restaurant that bore his name, Kara and Michele, whom had both been to the famous royal château outside Paris, believed they were there once again. A Félix Hyppolite Lucas fresco dominated the ceiling and directly underneath an immense flower arrangement on a table of marble and gold anchored the center of the room. Their feet sank into the thick carpet with its pattern of flowers. Portraits of courtesans hung on every wall and marble and plaster busts adorned the top of wood chests, along with clocks whose hands had been stopped at midday, said to remind the guests that they were there to enjoy the pleasures of fine food and to not be rushed. Large mirrors hung from walls covered in gold and cream, reflecting the scene so that the up to fifty guests could enjoy everything that was going on.

Large French windows opened onto a terrace on a level with the Place du Casino, though tonight they were closed so as to not allow the hustle and bustle outside to interfere with the atmosphere inside. The three were shown to a table in the corner next to one of those windows with a beautiful view of the dining room and the lights outside.

Kara was used to grand dining and Claes practiced haute cuisine at the compound under Michele's tutelage, but the six-course "Pour les gourmets" meal served blew them both away. Each ordered something different so they could all experiment (discreetly, of course). Each course came with its own china, silverware and even matching candle color. Over the course of the meal, some fifty pieces each were rotated. The wine cellar was immense and Michele and the sommelier worked together to choose wines that highlighted the evening's bounty. Even for Italians, being presented the option of a dozen different beans from around the world to be blended into their after-dinner espressos made for some hard choices.

"I want to weep with joy," Claes noted as they exited the hotel and crossed over to the central fountain in the square. "I didn't think food could taste that good."

"I think Pierre Gagnaire in Paris has the edge for French cooking, but when it comes to exemplifying the flavors and products of the Mediterranean, I do not think you can beat the restaurant Louis XV," Michele noted.

"That was...was...I don't know the words to describe it," Kara admitted. "I thought I'd reached heaven when you took me to Bestiary in Barcelona, but this was on a different plane..."

"Bestiary is amazing, but last time I was in Barcelona a friend drove us 175km north to Cala Montjoi and we had dinner at El Bulli. I tell you honestly, there is no finer restaurant on the planet. It is number three right now in the world rankings, but I am confident it will take over first place from The Fat Duck in the UK this year."

"That's a funny name for a restaurant," Claes noted. "Then again, maybe it's rather fitting." They stood and watched the light play off the water in the fountain.

"I'd take you in the casino, but unfortunately they check ID and the minimum age is 18," Michele noted. With the mission over, both Kara and Claes came into France with their actual passports. "We could go down to the harbor," he offered.

"I'm too stuffed to walk," Kara noted. "I think I'd like to just go back to the hotel and relax on the terrace."

"What she said," Claes agreed.

Directly across from the Casino and in front of their hotel were the Allee des Boulingrins gardens, beautifully landscaped with four large fountains and plenty of walkways. For the Grand Prix they strung white lights along the pathway and the three joined the many people enjoying the pleasant night air. They spent about a half hour at the fountains and walking the pathways before returning to their hotel and changing into swim gear and heading to the pool for a quick swim and then back to their suite to relax on the terrace.

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While Kara wanted to stay out late that night, Michele forced her to go

to sleep early because he said they had an early morning event. They woke at 5.00 and were in a rented Bentley Continental GT a bit before 6.00. They drove well west along the A8 motorway through Nice and Cannes and on towards St. Tropez. At Le Cannet des Maures they turned onto the A57 motorway and arrived at the 2.2km Circuit du Var.

"What are we doing here?" Kara asked. Claes, who had already been let in on the secret by Michele the night before, stayed silent in the back seat.

"You are going to drive a Formula One race car," Michele said. Kara replied with a cock of her head and a look of bewilderment. Michele pulled out a color brochure from AGE Formule 1 and handed it over. Kara read it, her eyes getting wider and wider. Michele had signed her up for the "Hi-Tech" Formula 1 session. Running from 08.00 to 16.00, she would do 15 laps in a Formula Opel-Lotus single-seater and 15 laps in a Jordan EJ11 Formula One car, which had campaigned in the 2001 season in addition to classroom instruction, a tour of the workshops and lunch.

"I...I don't know what to say other than 'thank you', but that seems so inadequate," Kara noted, a tear forming in her eye.

Michele patted her thigh. "You're welcome." He leaned over and kissed her forehead.

"What about you and Claes?" she asked.

"Well I'd love to take a spin in the Peugeot 905 Le Man prototype, but alas they only offer the 'Masters' level at the Circuit Paul Ricard. So Claes and I are heading down to Saint-Tropez to go deep-sea fishing out in the Mediterranean. We will be back by 15.00 to watch you do your laps in the EJ11."

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Claes and Michele arrived at Saint-Tropez and were greeted by the mate of their boat. A 16m Angelmarine equipped for both deep-sea fishing and general cruising with a large main cabin and two smaller lateral cabins. There was also a large salon and a full kitchen.

They motored out past the Bay of Saint-Tropez and into the Mediterranean proper about twenty kilometers offshore and then started heading north along the coast roughly towards Cannes. Their

primary goal was swordfish, since Michele could use the steaks for a meal. Swordfish tended to hunt more in the evening than during the day and the lights of the boat drew the fish and squid that swordfish liked to dine upon. As such, most swordfishing was done at night. Since it was daylight hours, the Captain was using an electronic fish-finder to detect large schools of baitfish that might attract a hungry swordfish. He detected and started following a large school and as they cruised, Claes called out large splashes in the water about 50 meters off the starboard bow. Michele looked out with his binoculars and identified them as dolphins. He handed the glasses to Claes and she watched as the pod drifted towards them, squeezing the baitfish between the boat and themselves to make them form into a defensive ball that they could more easily attack. A few of the pod came right up against the boat, as if thanking them for helping set up brunch, before heading back to feed.

The Captain knew that swordfish would not appear with dolphins so he continued on, searching for another group of baitfish. When they found it, the Captain stopped and the crew started setting up the tackle and laying out the lines. The swells were very mild, at or under one meter on average, and spaced far apart. As such, the boat barely noticed them as it drifted. It was more like being on a lake than a sea.

There were certain legal minimums in terms of size (anything smaller than two meters was considered not worth landing) so in order to prevent "barotrauma" to a fish pulled up too quickly from a deep depth that they may have to subsequently release, they were rigging their four Shimano rods with 400 meters of line and the lines set to drift at and above the 30-meter mark. They were also using circle hooks to minimize the chances of the swordfish swallowing the hook.

Claes watched Michele set-up his line while the mate set the other three. As opposed to Formula One, this interested her and she paid close attention and Michele allowed her to perform much of the work. At that point, it was time to sit back and wait. About every 30 minutes they would check the tip rods to make sure the bait was still present, replacing it as necessary.

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"Fish on!" Michele yelled as line started playing out on one of the reels. Michele grabbed the rod and cranked until tight on the fish. They had finished brunch about 20 minutes earlier and Claes was in the front of the boat, enjoying the sun. She scrambled up and headed towards the stern.

As soon as the fish was tight, Michele set the drag for 5 kilos to keep the hook from tearing through the fish's mouth. Meanwhile, the mate quickly pulled in the other lines to prevent the fish from snagging them and the Captain maneuvered the boat to ensure that the fish remained astern.

As Claes came up, she saw the fish break the water about 100 meters astern.

"Looks to be about a two-meter fish. Probably a male," the Captain called out. Claes had done some basic studying and knew such fish averaged around three meters in length with weights of around 100 kilos.

"He's a fighter, to be sure," Michele said as it slowly spooled out line against the drag. The line went slack and Michele quickly reeled it tight again. It went like that for an hour – the fish would run out some line and Michele would wait for it to go slack as the fish rested and reel it back in. Then the fish would run again, followed by a rest period. After a time, he wished he could hand the rod over to Claes, whose augmented limbs and muscles could easily handle the strain. But he knew the crew would think he was nuts handing over what was likely a 40 kilo game fish to a young girl who looked like she weighed about as much. And then when she promptly landed the thing...

After each successive run, however, Michele would recover a few more meters of line. It was proof that the fish, if not yet ready to wave the white flag, at least wanted to have it handy. The mate felt the same, so Michele turned to Claes.

"Do you want to take a crack at it?" he asked. She shook her head.

"This one is yours," she replied. "I'm content to watch for now."

It took another ninety minutes, but finally the fish accepted its fate. As Michele reeled it alongside, the mate measured it.

"2.3 meters," the mate said. He then gaffed the fish and hauled it aboard. They strung it up from the mast so Michele and Claes could have their picture taken with it and then the mate did a basic cleaning and dressing, removing the head, fins, gill covers and guts. He then brushed and rinsed the inside of the fish, placed it in a polyethylene "body bag" and lowered it into the hold, covering it with ice.

While the mate cleaned the catch, the Captain motored on to a new area. They switched from swordfish to tuna as Michele didn't feel like trying to land another sword and he wanted Claes to have a chance. Tuna were less than half the weight and while a northern bluefin would put up a fight, they were more likely to catch a smaller albacore. Again, four lines went out and within 30 minutes they had a strong bite.

Michele strapped Claes into one of the two fighting chairs and had just handed her the rod and showed her how to tighten the line up when suddenly another rod started unwinding. Michele grabbed that one and sat down, quickly tightening the line. The mate again hauled in the other two lines and Michele and Claes together worked to land their fish, which turned out to both be Northern bluefin tunas. Claes' was the larger, at about 30kg while Michele's was a younger one at around 20kg. As bluefin were a critically endangered species, Michele released his, but Claes' fish had been hauled up from deep water so they decided to keep it as it was probably too injured to survive. The mate stunned it with a blow to the head and then proceeded to kill, bleed and clean it before setting it up for Claes to have her picture taken with it and then packing it in ice in the ship's hold.

By then, it was 13.30 and it was time to head back to Saint-Tropez. They pulled in an hour later to the port and Michele gave instructions for having both fish air-shipped on to Rome and delivered to the SWA compound.

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"Do you fresh-water fish?" Claes asked Michele as they drove the Bentley along D558 towards the Circuit du Var.

"When I was a young boy, my father and uncle used to take me to Lake Viverone and Lake Iseo. And sometimes we would summer vacation on Lake Garda or Lake Como. We would sometimes fish for brown trout or perch. I do keep my freshwater fishing license current since when I camp I sometimes like to toss a few casts. But most of my fishing now is saltwater."

"You do not need a license to fish in the sea?" Claes asked,

Michele shook his head. "If it is a body of fresh water on public land, like a stream, river or lake, you must have a license regardless of your age. However, for private land and saltwater, no license is required. It

is the same in France, which is why we did not need licenses today.”

“Saltwater fishing is certainly very different from what I have studied for freshwater,” Claes noted. “The tackle is quite different, but then saltwater fishes are much larger and heavier so that would make sense. And you fish from a boat.”

“You can saltwater fish from the beach,” Michele replied. “Though the types of fish you catch are different then when out in deeper water. And I have fished on freshwater lakes from boats.”

“I think I would like to try freshwater fishing,” Claes noted. “I watched a movie that showed someone fishing in a lake and it looked very peaceful.”

“It can be, if you find the right lake at the right time,” Michele agreed. “I admit to not being much of a fan of lake trout, but roasted over a fire with the right seasoning it is not too bad. And the stargazing can be amazing on some of the Alpine lakes.”

Claes felt her appetite arouse at the thought of roasted trout, yet she could not recall ever having trout period, much less roasted. She assumed she was just hungry as brunch had been many hours prior.

“I believe Marco mentioned that he river fishes,” Michele noted. “Maybe we can organize an overnight field trip or something. I think Kara would like it and Angelica could benefit from getting out into the fresh air.”

They arrived at the circuit just before 15.00. Michele and Claes waved to Kara as she received her final instructions and slipped into the seat. As she was the only person doing the maximum of 15 laps, she was scheduled to go last. Her EJ11 was fitted with a 3.5L Ford-Cosworth DFR V8 Formula One engines designed and campaigned in the late 1980s generating 650hp at 11,000 rpm and would push the cars to almost 300kph if there were enough track.

A mechanic hauled on the belts until Kara felt she was part of the car, and then gave them a final tug for good measure. She took her feet off the pedals and flipped the ignition switch. Behind her, an air starter inserted into the crankshaft whirled and the engine barked to life with the shriek of a hundred banshees. Instead of fear or trepidation, Kara felt only exhilaration.

She pressed in the heavy clutch and called up first gear, which engaged with a strong clunk that vibrated through the car as it rocked forward slightly. She pressed down with her right foot until the tachometer showed five thousand RPM and she knew the engine was already generating twice as much power as full throttle in the Opel-Lotus she's driven earlier that day. She felt the clutch bite as she slowly released it, but instead of continuing she held it there, riding it down the pit lane. While anathema in a road car, it was actually required in this machine to heat it up to the point it would properly engage when called upon by the transmission electronics. After traveling fifty meters, she released the clutch fully and she was off.

She up-shifted to second and tiptoed through Le Snack and L'Autoroute. Every millimeter of throttle travel unleashed a score of horsepower and she explored it carefully. By the end of the first lap she was comfortable with the performance of the car. As she came out of the final turn onto the front straight she opened up the throttle. She thought the 456 GTA M accelerated hard, but it was like a horse-drawn carriage compared to the fury unleashed when she planted her right foot. The car touched 260 kph before she braked hard for the first left-hander at Le Snack, dropping two gears and accelerating to L'Autoroute where she braked again and dropped down two more gears. She accelerated to Le Bosquet, grabbing third and braking slightly as she came out of the corner before accelerating hard and climbing two gears as she approached Les Esses, where she braked again and dropped back to fourth gear. She used the immense aero-braking effect of the front and rear wings to help her negotiate the esses before she accelerated up to Double Droite at the top of the circuit. This near 180-degree turn required her to brake hard and as the car's speed dropped below 140kph, the downforce from the wings disappeared and she had to be careful to not lock the brakes. From there it was flat down the back straight, using the aero-braking and a lift off the throttle to negotiate the right-hand bend in the middle and then another hard deceleration and downshifting four gears for the final corner at Virage AGS which led back onto the main straight.

With the completion of each lap she felt more comfortable and pushed harder through the next. She braked later and accelerated sooner. The faster she drove, the more effectively the aero package glued the car to the track. The brakes stopped the car as effectively – and as violently – as hitting a concrete wall. The deceleration felt as if her eyeballs were literally leaving their sockets.

Though it lasted just over twenty minutes, it seemed to Kara as if her

fifteen laps were over in a blink of an eye. She pulled herself out of the car and removed her helmet, her face showing her pleasure and happiness and a sense of pure euphoria at what she had experienced. She headed for the showers to clean-up and change into her street clothes while Michele and Claes changed into driving suits and were each driven around the circuit first in a British Touring Car Championship-spec Peugeot 406 and then an AGS X2 two-seat Formula One car with the same engine that powered Kara's ride.

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After the festivities at Circuit du Var, they piled into the Bentley for the drive back to Monte-Carlo.

"That was such a rush!" Kara exclaimed from the passenger seat. "The acceleration and braking were so much more than I initially expected."

Claes was behind her in the back and Kara turned to look at her and Michele.

"So how was the fishing?" she asked.

"Michele caught a swordfish and we both caught a bluefin tuna. He let his loose, but mine was injured so we kept it. Michele shipped them to the compound. So I am guessing we're having fish tomorrow night."

"I love tuna and swordfish, so that sounds great to me," Kara said. "Did you enjoy yourself?"

Claes nodded. "It was both relaxing and...exciting, at the same time."

All three discussed their adventures as they drove back to Monte Carlo. When they returned to the hotel they showered and changed into informal evening attire and made their way to the Yacht Club de Monaco where they boarded a Pearl 60 cruising yacht for a pleasant dinner cruise around the French Riviera.

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"I'll be damned," Michele said under his breath as he reviewed the information on the PowerBook's screen late that evening when they had returned from the cruise and everyone had settled in for the night.

"Cavorting with demons again?" Kara joked as she came up behind him.

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Startled, Michele reached forward and slammed the lid of the laptop shut. He forgot sometimes that the cyborg's hearing was enhanced and a whisper was as good as a shout in their immediate presence.

"What is it?" Kara asked.

"Nothing," Michele said. "Shouldn't you be in bed?" he added. It was close to eleven and they were heading back to Rome in the morning.

"I was thirsty and wanted to get some water," Kara replied. "Seriously, what were you doing? It looked like a personnel dossier." Cyborgs also had enhanced visual acuity.

"Nothing of note, Kara," he replied.

"Your body language says otherwise," she stated. Michele suddenly recalled a briefing by the medical staff noting that the cyborg's enhanced senses could be used as a crude method of performing a psychophysiological detection of deception – a fancy way of saying they could sometimes identify when a person was lying.

"I don't know whether what I have found means anything, but the less you know, the safer you are," Michele said.

"My job is to protect you, Michele. Not the other way around."

"Your job is to protect the Republic against those that threaten its security and the safety of the people, Kara Michelle," Michele replied. When he used her middle name, it was a sign he was annoyed with her.

"You don't trust me? Is that it?" she said, and Michele could hear the hurt in her voice and see it on her face.

"It's not a matter of trust, Kara...Well, it is, but not in the way you think," Michele said, turning his back to her. He opened the laptop and started minimizing and/or closing the windows so she couldn't see what they said. With an ironic smile, he wondered if teaching her computer hacking skills had been such a great idea, after all. He decided to start moving the information to a removable flash drive.

"I would never betray a confidence," Kara said. "I'm programmed to be loyal to you and we're a *fratello*. If we cannot trust each other, who can we trust?"

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"We may not always be a *fratello*, Kara," Michele said. If he'd been in a position to see the expression of shock and dismay on her face when he said those words, he'd have immediately withdrawn them.

"And as for loyalty, because it is programmed, the Agency can change that," Michele noted.

"If they tried, they would fail," Kara stated matter-of-factly. "I could never cross someone I respect as much as I do you."

"Not if the Agency made you forget me," Michele said under his breath, again forgetting Kara's ability.

"Why would you say that? I could never forget you! This weekend has been pure magic to me. Even now I can't believe it happened," Kara said, her voice breaking with emotion. "How could I forget something that made me feel so good?"

Michele turned and saw tears streaming down her face and he realized that he had gone too far.

"You gave me my life back after the accident!" she exclaimed as sobs wracked her body. "As long as there is breath in my body, I will never, ever, forget the wonderful gifts you have given me!"

"Kara...I didn't mean..." he said.

"I would never forget you!" she repeated, even more forcefully. "Even if we were no longer a *fratello*, I would remember you! The Agency could never take these precious memories from me! I wouldn't let them!" she proclaimed as she slumped down on the couch, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Michele came over and sat next to her on the couch, struggling to find the words to comfort her. Finding none, he settled for putting his hand on her shoulder.

"*Michele no baka!*" she yelled and threw herself into his arms, sobbing. He held her tightly to him, trying to comfort her and take back the words that had caused her pain.

Just out of sight, Claes stood, having watched it all transpire and having heard every word they exchanged. She dropped her head and

went back to her room.

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It took awhile, but Kara eventually settled down.

She was deeply upset with Michele, as well as deeply afraid of what he had said. The possibility of forgetting him or not being in a *fratello* with him was as foreign to her as breathing air was to a deep-sea creature. Her mind just couldn't comprehend such a thing, in no small part because her conditioning did not make any allowance for it.

She had refused going back to her room, adamant that she would stay with him. He placed her on his bed and pulled up a chair, staying with her until she fell asleep.

When she did, he went into the bathroom and removed a syringe and a vial from his personal kit. In the vial was a chemical that would increase production of a memory-blocking protein by the body that would impact short-term memory. If taken soon enough, it prevented short-term memories from being imprinted and becoming long-term memories. Dosage determined the amount of blockage, and Michele went with the minimum amount.

He didn't want to do it, but he couldn't risk her remembering their discussion. That it was his own fault only made him feel worse, but he knew he didn't have a choice. He had nurtured her own natural curiosity and he was afraid she wouldn't let it go, or worse, discuss it with the other cyborgs. He was also afraid how that fear would affect her behavior.

"Hung by my own petard," Michele muttered to himself as he looked at himself in the mirror. "Kara's right. I really am an idiot."

The cyborgs had a somatosensory system that transmitted sensations of touch, temperature, body position and pain. However, the medical team expected there may be times when they needed to administer intravenous injections to them without their noticing, so there was an area on each upper arm and both lower legs where that system was not present and they would sense nothing. It was in that area on her upper arm that he injected the chemical.

He then picked her up and carried her back to her own bed, careful to not wake Claes, who was fast asleep in the other bed. In the darkness, he could not see that there were tears on her cheek, as well.

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When Tuesday morning came, the drug had performed it's work and Kara had no memories after 10:00PM the previous night. She often didn't remember events that took place soon before she went to sleep, so it didn't register as anything unusual.

Beside her, Claes did remember everything that happened, but she was going to keep quiet unless Kara said something and when she didn't, Claes assumed Kara didn't want to discuss it. Which was a relief to Claes, since she wasn't sure she wanted to talk about it.

After her shower, Kara bounced into the living room area and gave Michele a hug.

"Thank you again for yesterday. I had so much fun," she noted.

"I'm glad," Michele said. He was relieved that she didn't seem to remember their talk and soon put it from his own mind as he prepared for their return to Rome.

They had breakfast and checked out of the hotel. They boarded their limo and drove back to Nice Côte d'Azur Airport where they boarded the P.180 and flew back to Rome Ciampino Airport.

"Thank you for coming to get us," Michele said to Ferro as they loaded their luggage into the rear of the Peugeot 807 minivan.

"Did you all have a good time in Monaco?" Ferro asked.

"It was amazing!" Kara exclaimed. Claes was more restrained, but she noted that she had enjoyed herself on the trip as well.

"The Director wants to see you as soon as we get back," Ferro informed Michele. "The girls are exempt," she added.

When they arrived at the SWA compound, their first stop was the dorms where the girls unloaded their personal luggage. The weapons trunk would be unloaded at the armory after Ferro dropped Michele off at the front office.

"Nice tan, Michele," Amadeo noted as Michele walked down the hall towards Director Lorenzo's office. "How was high tea with his Serene Highness?"

"Very serene. I passed on your regards," Michele noted with a smile. He knocked once on the door and entered the outer reception area. In addition to Lorenzo's assistant, he saw Jean and Giuseppe Croce sitting on the couch.

"The Director will see you now," the assistant said before Michele had a chance to sit down. He followed Lorenzo's assistant with Jean and Giuse behind him.

"Excellent work in Geneva, gentlemen," Lorenzo stated. "We'll do the formal debriefing tomorrow after you have rested. I just wanted to thank you both and to have you extend that thanks to your girls. This mission is a real feather in our cap and should help silence some of our more vocal critics within both Public Safety and the government, in general."

He turned to Michele. "There will be no problems with the Russians?"

Michele shook his head. "Nadia reported to her superiors that an 'unknown third party' killed Lompar before she and Aleksi could act. Her superiors are happy he's gone, so they're not going to raise any questions. As for anyone else with an interest in what happened, I trust we were discreet enough that it won't be tracked back to us."

Lorenzo nodded. "I'm pleased with the reports of Kara's leadership on the actual sanction," he noted. "While we never foresee the cyborgs operating independently from their handlers, that Kara was able to successfully lead the team and prosecute the mission is a reflection on your training of her. Well done."

Michele nodded politely and Lorenzo looked to Giuseppe.

"Henrietta's performance was also excellent," he noted.

"She showed some spontaneity in identifying where Lompar was staying, but it ended up being effective at securing that information," Giuseppe admitted. "As for the actual sanction, thanks to Kara's presence and direction she was calm and did it with one shot right on target."

"How did Claes perform?" Jean asked.

"I believe she did fine. She worked with Kara on the initial

reconnaissance of Lompar's suite at our hotel and made it possible for the successful sanction against him to happen."

"It would have been nice if she could have taken a more active role in the mission. The last real combat data we have with her was when she masqueraded as that Senator's daughter last December," Lorenzo noted.

"Circumstances prevented it," Michele noted, omitting the fact that his goal was to try and keep her away from just such a situation.

"Once again you have my thanks and the thanks of Minister Petris. I'll see you tomorrow at nine."

Michele and Giuseppe nodded and headed for the door. Giuse held it for his brother, but when Jean made no move towards it, he closed it behind him.

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On Wednesday morning, Kara awoke with the sun and dressed in her blue keikogi and black hakama. She pulled her iaitō down from the shelf and went out in an open area in front of the dormitory and started practicing iaijutsu, the Japanese martial art of drawing the sword and performing the initial attack moves with it. Unlike the art of kenjutsu, which usually involves an opponent to spar against, iaijutsu allows the practitioner to perfect the execution of techniques, body position and displacement, which they will later employ in their kenjutsu with a sparring partner.

She spent the next 30 minutes practicing the various kata - detailed choreographed patterns of movements - and kihon - the basic foundational practices and techniques. When she was done, she heard someone clapping. She looked up to see Claes and Triela looking down at her from their dorm window, the latter one giving her a thumbs-up.

"That's so cool!" Triela exclaimed. She and Kara had both undergone training in Nippon Kempo at the hands of the Gruppo di Intervento Speciale at a Carabinieri facility outside of Rome, which had peaked Triela's interest in all forms of martial arts.

"Thank you," Kara said.

"Come on up," Triela called. Kara nodded and headed for the dorm. She stopped in one of the bathrooms and wetted a towel to clean

herself up a bit before knocking on the door to Claes' and Triela's room. Claes had returned to her bunk and Triela was sitting at the table, both still in their pajamas. Kara scooted one of the chairs aside and rested on her legs.

"What were you doing?" Triela asked.

"Practicing *kenjutsu*, or sword arts," Kara replied. "I have a meet at the Kobukan dojo tomorrow night."

"You belong to a dojo?"

"Yes. Michele enrolled me in Tenshin Shōden Katori Shintō-ryū, one of the oldest schools of Japanese martial arts. He has been a member of the Zanshin Dojo in Milano for over two decades. Watching him practice, I expressed an interest so he enrolled me in Kobukan here in Rome last year. As such, I am only a novice, learning the basics of the sword and sword-drawing as well as studies in Gunbai-Heihō and Tenmon Chirigaku."

"You talk as if I am supposed to know all these Japanese words," Triela laughed.

"I'm sorry," Kara replied, bowing reflexively. "Gunbai-Heihō concerns strategy and tactics and Tenmon Chirigaku is the study of astronomy and geomantic divination."

"Can I see your sword?" Triela asked.

"It is actually called an *iaitō*, because it has a blunt edge and is made of a zinc/beryllium alloy instead of steel," Kara noted as she removed it from the scabbard in a smooth motion and handed it to Triela. "A real sword is known as a *shinken*," she added.

"Why the alloy?"

"Japan has strict legal restrictions on the manufacture and ownership of swords made of ferrous metals. Also, many dojos have their own restrictions on 'real' vs. 'practice' blades. An *iaitō* is designed solely as a practice item and therefore is more loosely regulated."

"Do you have a *shinken*?" Triela asked as she performed a few test slashes.

"Be careful where you swing that," Claes warned. "I wouldn't want Augustus to get beheaded."

Kara nodded her head to Triela's original question. "Yes, it is a katana that Michele bought for me. In addition to *iaidō*, I also use it when practicing *tameshigiri*, which is the Japanese art of target test cutting."

"Sword fighting seems so anachronistic in today's world of guns," Claes noted.

"I carry an M1917 bayonet on the end of my shotgun," Triela replied. "When I expend my six shots, the bayonet allows me to continue to do damage and also has a psychological role against opponents."

"Are you familiar with *jūkendō*?" Kara asked. The blank expression Triela returned indicated she did not. "It is the Japanese martial art of bayonet fighting. I admit it is a rather uncommon martial art, so I am not surprised you have not heard of it."

"Hillshire had me perform the basic rifle bayonet course for the Army," Triela replied.

"Still, I don't see what swinging a sword while shouting offers you on a mission," Claes stated.

"A katana could do some serious damage to someone," Triela noted.

"Michele would skin me alive with his katana if I took mine into combat," Kara shuddered. "While not nearly as nice as his Kanemitsu blade, it's still a very expensive piece because it is *gendaito*, or hand-made by a licensed swordsmith."

"So why do you practice?" Claes asked.

"Like playing a sport or a musical instrument, it helped me get used to my prosthetics after the surgeries. There is another martial art, *iaidō*, which encompasses smooth, controlled movements of drawing the sword from its scabbard, striking or cutting an opponent, removing blood from the blade, and then replacing the sword in the scabbard. Because of the emphasis on precise, controlled, fluid motion, it is sometimes referred to as 'moving Zen'. Practicing it helps me relax and focus my thoughts."

"Why not just practice traditional meditation?"

"I do that, as well. I also practice Tai chi chuan in the modern wushu form, which emphasizes the aesthetics of the positions and movements only as it also helped me come to grips with my newly-augmented body. I find doing both Tai chi and certain kata of iaidō that it helps not just to relax my mind, but also focus it."

Hmm..." Claes said, a thoughtful expression on her face. "I have no interest in learning swordplay as a combat skill, but for meditative purposes, I might be interested in learning some of these...kata, as you call them."

"I would be happy to show you," Kara replied. "I have a bokken, a wooden practice sword, you could use."

"When is your next practice session?" Claes asked.

"I have firearms practice this morning and then school this afternoon. I was thinking of trying to get in an hour or so before dinner. Would that work?"

"Ok," Claes agreed.

"I want to try!" Triela said, raising her right arm into the air as if he was in school asking to be called upon by the teacher.

"You're welcome to come, as well," Kara said.

"What should I wear?"

"Standard physical education gear is fine," Kara replied. "I'll see you at 4:00!" She rose, recovered her iaitō from Triela, bowed, and left the room to head to the showers.

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Claes and Triela showed up at the appointed time and Kara handed them both training bokken, instructing them on the proper way to hold them. She then walked them through some of the more stylistic kata. They worked on it for about 30 minutes and then Kara introduced them to basic Tai chi chuan forms for another 30, before they broke off to shower and prepare for dinner.

"Kara," Claes called after Triela had left.

"Yes?"

"About Monday night...Well, I normally don't get involved with the girls and their handlers. Triela is more comfortable with such things. However, if you want to talk about the fight you and Michele had...I'm willing to listen."

Kara cocked her head and her face took on a confused expression.

"Fight? What fight?" she asked.

"Okay, maybe fight wasn't the right word. But you did look upset by what he said to you," Claes replied.

"I'm sorry, Claes, but I don't understand. You're saying that Michele and I had a fight?"

"Well it was a pretty serious discussion, considering how you reacted," Claes observed. She noted that Kara continued to look totally confused.

"What do you remember about Monday?" Claes asked, warily.

"Michele woke us up early and drove us to the Circuit du Var where I got to spend the day learning how to drive a Formula One car while you and he chartered a fishing boat and went deep-sea fishing. You caught the tuna and he the swordfish that we had last night for dinner. We then drove back to Monte Carlo and had dinner on a really nice yacht outside the harbor."

"And after that?"

"We went back to the hotel and we went to sleep," Kara replied. "I was exhausted from all the fun. I remember you and I talked in our beds about the Geneva mission for a bit, then I must have fallen asleep."

"You don't remember anything after that?" Claes asked.

"Just waking up in the morning and heading to Nice to fly here. Should I? Sometimes my memory just before I fall asleep is a little hazy. But I am sure I would have remembered a fight with Michele."

"Forget I brought it up, Kara," Claes said and Kara shrugged, but nodded her head.

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Claes was working in the garden in the late afternoon on Wednesday when Michele walked up to her. She looked up and she saw he had a serious expression on his face.

"When you are done, please change into something warm and meet me in my dorm room," he said. "This...this is not a request," he added and turned to leave.

"What's happening?" Claes called after him, but she saw Michele just shake his head.

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Claes knocked on Michele's door. She had changed into jeans and boots with her coat.

The door opened and Michele appeared. He wore a black military wool sweater, more commonly known as a "woolly-pulley" over dark slacks.

"Let's go," he said.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Not here," he replied.

Claes followed him out front and slipped into the passenger seat of his Ferrari F430. She knew Kara and Triela were at Kara's dojo and was wondering if that was where they were going. However, as soon as they merged onto the A24 – the "Autostrada of the Parks" – and headed east, she was lost. Claes could read enough of Michele's expression that he wasn't being forthcoming out of spite or drama, so she didn't press for information, instead sitting back and watching the scenery whizz by at 150kmh, listening to the sound of the wind, tires and engine create their own symphony.

In less than fifteen minutes they had crossed over the A1 Autostrada that ran between Milan and Naples and were taking the exit for the ancient Italian town of Tivoli. However, instead of going north on provincial road SP51a into Tivoli, Michele headed south to the Via Pottense, which wound through farmland and forest. He exited at the bend where it became the Via Roma towards the village of Poli and followed a small road up into the hills. He pulled off in a secluded area near a clearing in the forest.

"We're here," Michele said, cryptically, and exited the car. Claes followed. Michele went to the forward trunk and removed Kara's telescope, which he handed to Claes. He also removed a large basket and a backpack, which he took with him.

"Follow me," he said and headed away from the car about 100 meters. He pulled a large camp blanket out of its pouch and laid it on the ground. Dusk had settled over the land and Michele removed a tri-candle camp lantern and lit it, throwing a soft light across the blanket.

"If you wanted to stargaze, we could have done that back at the compound or even the training range," Claes noted, a bit unsettled. She didn't understand why they were alone in a forest hill hundreds of meters up and tens of kilometers from Rome. She was confident it had nothing to do with looking at the night sky, however.

"You witnessed the...discussion...Kara and I had Saturday night in Monaco," Michele stated.

Claes saw no reason to deny it, so she nodded her head. "Why doesn't she remember it?" she asked.

"Because I wiped her memory," Michele replied, softly.

"You what? Why?" Claes demanded, leaning forward.

"Because she is a curious girl," Michele replied. "She may have seen something she shouldn't have on my laptop screen. And the discussion we had scared her—perhaps scarred her, even. I was afraid she might bring either up with you or one of the other girls or even the medical staff. For her safety, I could not allow it so I used a drug Doctor Bianchi gave to all the handlers for just such...situations."

"And you plan to do the same with me? Is that why we're out here?" Claes asked, her body unconsciously tensing.

"No," Michele said. "The reason I brought you out here was to discuss your memories, not erase them. And to do that, we can't be where anyone from the Agency might be in a position to eavesdrop."

Claes involuntarily sucked in her own breath as a chill ran down her spine—a chill not caused by the cold of the altitude.

"What do you mean?"

"On Lake Geneva, you asked who Raballo was—."

"And you said you'd never heard of him," Claes interrupted,

"And I didn't," Michele replied.

"Didn't? You used the past tense there," Claes noted.

"When we had that conversation, I had no knowledge of him," Michele replied.

"So what changed?"

"That night I contacted Jean Croce. Before we left for Geneva, he'd instructed me to...keep an eye...on you. About how you acted during the mission," Michele informed her.

"You told him of our conversation?" she accused.

"Might I remind you that you were the one who started that conversation," Michele said. "And no, I didn't tell him you'd mentioned the name Raballo nor did I tell him about the nightmare about Henrietta and Giuseppe. I said only that you had just shown general enjoyment while out on the Lake. I intend to report the same to him when I brief him on our fishing trip and the dinner cruise."

While her face showed the usual stoic calm, inside Claes' emotions were in turmoil.

"You found Raballo," she said. "That was what Kara saw on your laptop."

Michele nodded.

"Don't leave me in suspense, Michele. Tell me about him."

"I'm not sure I should," Michele replied. "And before you roll your eyes and scowl at me, it's not pure altruism for your safety that makes me hesitate. I was never informed whom this person was and I don't believe it was a case of it slipping the Director's mind when he briefed me on Section 2 and the staff. I assume I was not told about him for a

reason and I imagine that neither Lorenzo nor Croce would be pleased to find out I was doing research on my own about him.”

Michele opened a thermos and poured two cups of hot chocolate, one of which he placed in front of Claes. He also took out a plate of freshly baked cookies and laid it between them.

“Has Triela or Henrietta or the others ever mentioned his name to you?” he asked.

Claes shook her head in the negative.

“I doubt they’d willingly keep a secret from you, so if they wiped any knowledge of him from your mind, then they wiped it from their minds, as well.”

Claes looked Michele directly in the eyes, her face a mask of seriousness and earnestness.

“Please, tell me about Raballo,” she asked.

Michele sighed. He felt he was walking out over a deep lake, and he wasn’t sure how thick the ice supporting his weight was.

“His government record states he joined Public Safety in late 2002. Before that, he was a Captain in the Gruppo di Intervento Speciale of the Carabinieri. He was injured in a training accident and retired from active duty.”

“Was he a handler?” she asked.

“I don’t know. His government record doesn’t say what he did and Public Safety staff dossiers are classified above my pay grade. I believe that if I asked, at best I would be stonewalled and at worse... Well, let’s say I don’t want to find out. I could see someone from the GIS being sought as an instructor, at least. You said the guard often saw you in his company at the firing range. Perhaps he was a firearms instructor or even the range master.”

“What happened to him?”

“His government dossier says he was killed in a hit-and-run accident in Rome. It is no secret that hit and run events are unfortunately somewhat common in the city. I checked [La Repubblica](#) on that date

and it does have a report of an older man being killed in a pedestrian crosswalk near the Rome office of Corriere della Sera. It did not give his name and I have not been able to find an arrest record, so I am guessing it remains unsolved.”

“That’s not very much,” she noted, though she didn’t mean it as a rebuke of Michele’s efforts and he understood that. She had hoped what he knew would fill in gaps or spark new memories, but she didn’t feel any different.

“It is quite possible that this Raballo might have nothing to do with you, Claes. We don’t even know he was in Section 2, we’re just assuming he was. Public Safety is a big place. I was part of it for over three years and there were people I never met.”

“Do you think they would have gone through all the trouble of erasing his existence from our memories if he was some minor functionary?” Claes asked, skepticism evident in her voice.

“I agree, it sounds like a lot of work, but maybe they felt it important to maintain the secret of the cyborg program. When Elsa and Lauro were ambushed, that caused a lot of embarrassment for Section 2, in no small part because too many people in the government know a bit too much about the program and those who don’t want to see it continue tried to use the incident to push their own agendas. It could also be a case of trying to cover up wrongdoing. This Raballo might have been an instructor who did something...wrong...to you girls.”

“You’re saying he may have sexually assaulted us.”

Michele raised his hands and shrugged. “I’m saying that, *if* it happened and *if* he was the one behind it, that would help explain why they wiped your memories of him. It is certainly not something that the Agency would want you to remember.”

Claes had to admit it was not beyond the realm of possibility. The cyborgs were conditioned to respond to authority figures. She also suspected that Petrushka and Alessandro, if not yet sexually active, might be moving towards such a relationship. So if she had been ordered to have sex with him, she might very well have done so. The girls were rendered sterile during their conversion, but their sexual organs were left in place for hormonal reasons.

"On the other hand, your memories might have been wiped to correct a flaw in your programming. Maybe your nightmare about pulling a weapon on Henrietta and Giuseppe wasn't a nightmare, but an unintended side effect of the conditioning that they wanted to remove. If something bad almost happened on the range and this Raballo fellow was a part of it, they would not want any memories of it after the fact. Honestly, we could speculate all night, but I'm not sure that is either productive or healthy for either of us to do so. For whatever reason, Claes, somebody doesn't want you to remember something, be it an event or a person or both. And they have gone to lengths to ensure that. I think we could end up having regrets if we are not careful," Michele finished.

Claes wasn't sure how to proceed. She wasn't sure that she could trust him. He'd admitted that he and Jean talked about her memories. The other Series 1 handlers were cordial to her, but never really warm. Michele and Alessandro both appeared to show genuine concern for her, but could that be part of the plan? Her familiarity with the Series 2 handlers was much less than it was with Hillshire and Giuseppe. She could not read them nearly as well except when they were being obvious, like Alessandro after the incident with Petrushka in the shower.

But her own efforts to unlock the mystery had so far been unsuccessful, and she could only do so much without attracting attention. And if Jean and the others really were watching her, that limited her movements even more. And what would happen if they caught her? Would they perform an even deeper wipe on her memories? Would they wipe her clean of everything just to be safe?

She looked hard at Michele while he chewed on a chocolate chip cookie and examined the sky. Her ability to detect when someone was not being truthful was poor due to lack of training and experience. But her intuition said she could trust him. He'd wiped Kara's memory, but he did it out of compassion and a fear for her safety, not to keep a secret for the Agency. She felt she had to take a chance that he was sincere.

"I dream of him a great deal," Claes said.

"Of who?" Michele asked, snapping back to the present.

"I don't know who he is. It's just a form...a shadow, almost. I see a figure by a lakeshore, a fishing rod in his hand. Or across from me, his features obscured by the light of a campfire, the smell of grilled perch

and trout in my nose. Sometimes I am fishing, as well, or reading a book on species of lake fish under the shade of a tree. I see beautiful mountains in the distance and the air is cool, but fresh.

"But they're just fragments...fragments of a dream. I try and grasp on to them and hold them close, but they slip through my fingers like a trout in the water. I wake in the morning with tears on my cheeks, yet I don't understand why I can cry when I sleep, but not when I am awake."

"The picture of the angler you painted," Michele noted. "He is the person you dream of?"

Claes nodded.

"He could merely be dreams of a time before you came to the Agency," Michele noted. "The conditioning and preparation performed on each cyborg is not identical. While Triela and Henrietta both had most of their memories wiped, Rico and Kara both retain many of their memories prior to their joining the Agency. I demanded an active hand in how Kara's memories were re-written, partly to help make her training easier and partly to try and save what I could of her original personality."

"Well you would know more than I would about my past, since nobody bothered to share it with me," Claes spat and Michele noticed the undercurrent of bitterness in her tone.

"Cyborg dossiers are shared only with their handlers and certain senior staff members," Michele observed. "Other than Angelica and Kara, I am as ignorant of a cyborg's pre-history with the Agency as they themselves are."

"I like to think that maybe the person I dream of is my father and that he taught me how to enjoy my life with the Agency as well as being the person whom I made the promise with. The memories are so ethereal, but the emotions they stir inside me are anything but."

She sighed and took a sip of cocoa and a bite of a sugar cookie.

"I just wish I understood why I am remembering things."

"Even after years of field data, the cyborg program is still very much a black art," Michele noted. "A number of changes were made to the

conditioning regimen with the Series 2 girls to make them...well, more emotionally stable, frankly, and to also improve their combat effectiveness."

"Kara and I...fought...in Geneva that first night before dinner," Claes announced. "I accused you of being nice to me only because you felt sorry for me. Do you, Michele? Is this why you researched who Raballo was? To see if you could answer some of the questions I cannot?"

"As a military man, I understand the need for secrets and I respect that," Michele replied. "But I also believe that too often, things are made secret not because their public knowledge would damage the security of the country, but instead would embarrass an agency or an individual. Our current Prime Minister is proof of that with his control of the media, even if he has also pulled off a minor miracle in actually holding the government together these past four years. That being said, I also know that there are doors that are locked for a reason, and it may not be a prudent course of action to pick the lock to see what's on the other side."

"Kara trusts you implicitly, and I don't think it is just because she is programmed to. If you think it's dangerous, then I agree we should stop," Claes agreed.

*At least for the time being,* she added in her head. She looked up into the darkened sky, the stars starting to glow against the blackness like diamonds scattered on velvet.

"Should I pack up and we can head back?" Michele asked.

"I think I would like to just do nothing for a while, if I may," she requested. She slipped off her boots and laid back on the blanket, resting her head on her arms as she looked for shooting stars.

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**The End**