

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. Other characters are original to their respective creators.

"Damage Control Party"

A Gunslinger Girl: The Next Generation Original Story by Chris Wallace

SOCIAL WELFARE AGENCY COMPLEX EAST OF ROME

Colonel Michele Pagani walked briskly and deliberately towards the platoon of troopers clustered before the main gate leading into the SWA complex.

"Who's in charge here?" Michele demanded.

A young officer turned around and seeing the rank insignia on Michele's shoulder boards snapped to attention, the men around him quickly falling into line, as well.

"Colonel! Lieutenant Meroi, First Parachute Battalion, A Company!"

"Gather your men, Lieutenant. We'll take over from here," Michele ordered.

"With respect, Colonel, we're Carabinieri and you're Aeronautica Militare. I'm not sure you can give me an order," Meroi stated.

Michele turned and motioned to a group of soldiers in shadow next to a *Dardo* Infantry Fighting vehicle. Major Avise Mancini and six fellow Garibaldi Bersaglieri Brigade troopers in full battle dress marched forward into the light, Major Mancini looking resplendent in his duty uniform complete with black hat and plume. They formed up beside Michele, Beretta ARX160 assault rifles at the ready. Meroi noticed the trooper next to the Major was a teenaged girl, her uniform hanging off her frame. Yet her eyes bored into the Lieutenant's and he felt she was easily the most dangerous person on the grounds that evening.

"Don't make me insist, Lieutenant," Michele coldly stated. Down the road, Meroi saw the four *Centauro* tank destroyers that had accompanied General Pagani slewing their turrets onto his position.

"Don't listen to him, Lieutenant!" Anita Aragorn yelled as she came forward.

"Ah, Counselor. How nice of you to surrender yourself," Michele said. He nodded his head and two Bersaglieri moved forward, rifles drawn and pointed at her.

"What is this! I order you to stand down immediately!" she demanded.

"Counselor Aragon, I have a warrant for your arrest signed by the Minister of Justice. Please don't cause a scene," Michele stated.

"Contact the General, Lieutenant," Anita said.

"If you wish to talk to him, he's in that *Dardo*," Michele noted. "I arrested him on the way here."

He turned back to Meroi.

"What's it going to be, Lieutenant?"

Meroi knew he outnumbered Michele and Avise in men, but he was significantly outclassed in firepower. The *Centauro* Oto Melara 105mm canon would turn his armored vehicles into crematoriums and their coaxial machine guns would cut down his men where they stood.

He lowered his weapon and instructed his platoon to do the same.

"Coward," Anita spat as she was carried away by the two Bersaglieri.

"Enough lives have been thrown away tonight, Counselor," Michele noted. He walked forward through the makeshift barrier of vehicles and sandbags and past the automated defense turret. As he did, his phone rang.

"Your timing is impeccable," Monica Petris noted. Michele looked up to see the MQ-1C Predator hovering overhead.

"A few elements in the Cabinet and the military were trying to use the chaos to improve their position vis-à-vis the Prime Minister and he tasked me to round up the ring-leaders," Michele replied.

"Are the Director of Public Safety and myself on that list?" Monica asked.

"If you were, would you go quietly?" Michele asked.

"You're the one with the armored units at your command. And while I may be your nominal superior, I understand your relationship with Renato and where I stand therewith," Monica noted, pragmatically.

"That's comforting to know. For the record, only General Aragon and his niece are on my 'Naughty List' tonight," Michele replied. "That being said, I think Renato was upset that someone was trying to close the Agency as leverage against him, not that someone was trying to close the Agency. If and when it comes time for us to go quietly into that good night, it won't be at the end of pointed guns."

"That is comforting to know, Michele," Monica said as the line went dead.

Claes heard the door to the room open.

"Go away!" she said.

"I just need to get my keys," a familiar voice said and Claes shot up from the bed.

"Michele!"

"I heard you faced down a paratrooper company all on your own. Impressive," Michele noted.

"I was afraid they'd trample our garden," Claes replied with a wane smile. "I remember, Michele," she added. "The ways of war. My training. My body remembers how to hold this battle rifle and seek out and hold a target for a moment before moving on to the next."

"Do you remember who taught you?" Michele asked.

"No," Claes replied with a sigh of frustration. "They said a name – some Captain, I think – and the tears came, but try as I might, I just couldn't remember. I remember the sight of his back as I followed him when we were *fratello*, but his face...his name...it just will not come."

"The Medical Branch probably did to you what they did to Henrietta – bury your memories with a heavy dose of the conditioning medication," Michele noted. "They probably did it to all the cyborgs to make them forget you were once part of an active *fratello*."

"But why?" Claes asked.

"I don't know," Michele admitted.

"Is Kara okay?" Claes asked, suddenly realizing she had not come with Michele.

"I sent her to a friend in Paris. I wanted her out of Italy in case things get dicey."

"And the others?"

"All I know is that the fighting was said to be vicious and losses were heavy. I'm on my way up there now."

"Would it be alright for me to come with you?" Claes asked.

**NEW TRINO NUCLEAR PLANT
FOUR HOURS LATER**

The snow crunched under the tires of the Bentley Continental GT as Michele and Claes arrived at the front gate of the reactor complex. An Italian Army *Sergente Maggiore* waved the car to a stop and came up to the driver's side window, coming to attention as he saw Michele's rank insignia on his uniform coat.

"Direct me to your Commanding Officer," Michele stated, handing over his identification card.

"Yes, Colonel. Please proceed forward and to your left. The Command Tent is set up just in front of the Main Turbine Building. You will find *Capitano* Patrese inside."

Michele maneuvered towards the indicated destination, taking in the carnage surrounding the turbine building, cooling tower and control center. The wreckage of a transport helicopter hung over the edge of the turbine building and a construction crane lay across the top of a *Freccia* infantry fighting vehicle.

After parking, Michele and Claes exited and walked into the Command Tent. A *Capitano* sat behind the desk, coming to attention as Michele walked in.

"Good evening, *Colonello*. I just received a call from the Chief of Defense Staff confirming your orders to take command of the scene."

"Status report, please."

"Sir, we have secured the the facility. A nuclear incident team is on their way from Ghedi Air Base to recover the device. Giancamo Dante was seriously injured and is in our custody. All of the terrorists have either been KIA or captured."

Michele knew that Ghedi Air Base was the closest facility that housed nuclear weapons, two score of USAF B61 gravity bombs that were part of NATO's nuclear sharing program. However, the weapons at Ghedi were under Italian control, not American. It would be a secure facility for the device until it could be formally examined, and a determination made as to what to do with it.

"And the Agency forces?"

"Jean Croce was critically wounded," Patrese replied. "Our field surgeon has stabilized him, and we are arranging transport to the nearest trauma center. His brother was KIA along with a number of others. Director Lorenzo arrived a short while ago and is with the rest."

"Please take me to him," Michele asked.

"Michele! Claes!" Ferro called out as they approached.

"I hear you've been a busy man this evening," Lorenzo said.

"The PM has had me running from one end of the country to the other bringing this mess under some form of control," Michele admitted.

"Why is Claes with you? Where is Kara?" Ferro asked.

"Kara is in an undisclosed location outside of Italy," Michele replied.
"Claes offered to serve as my bodyguard in her place."

Ferro looked askance at Claes but said nothing.

"We're heading back to the Agency," Lorenzo stated.

"I'll return as soon as I can," Michele informed him.

"Very well. Stay safe."

Within the hour, an *Aeronautica Militare* AgustaWestland AW139 settled down in an open field and the special team secured the nuclear device and transferred it to the helicopter, which lifted off and disappeared into the low cloud deck. Michele placed a call to the Prime Minister informing him of the successful handoff.

"We've been cut loose for the evening," Michele informed Claes, afterwards. "I don't feel like driving back to Rome this late in the evening. We can be at my apartment in two hours if that is okay."

"Of course," Claes replied. "What will happen to Triela and the others?"

"A recovery team is being assembled and sent up. They'll be returned to the Agency and interred alongside Elsa, Angela, Silvia and Beatrice."

The drive back to Milan was a quiet one. Michele called his preferred local *ristorante* and had them prepare a small meal for two, which they brought out to his car. Once they arrived at Michele's apartment, they had dinner on the roof terrace.

After dinner, Michele started espresso and called Coraline.

"*Bonjour*, Michele."

"Did Kara make it safely to Paris?"

"We're uh, actually in Lyon," Coraline replied, sheepishly.

"I told her to go to Paris and call you," Michele stated.

"She called me from Lyon and explained what had happened. I gave her the address for a safe house and hopped the TGV down to meet her," Coraline explained.

"I wanted her away from Italy in case something happened," Michele said, surprised that Kara had disobeyed his instructions.

"She had conflicting imperatives," Coraline informed him. "She is compelled to follow your orders, but her primary imperative is to protect you. Ordering her away caused a logic loop, which she solved by reaching Lyon and calling me for assistance."

"How is she?" Michele asked.

"She's actually asleep right now. She's been so tense...the exhaustion finally overtook her."

"Let her sleep. When she awakes, tell her I am safe and that I will contact her tomorrow about coming back home."

"Will do. Take care, Michele."

**RISTORANTE LA PERGOLA
WALDORF ASTORIA ROME CAVALIERI HOTEL
ONE WEEK LATER**

"Someday I am going to extract the recipe for this Fagottelli Carbonara from *Signore Beck*," Renato Pisano noted, referring to the famous pasta dish of the restaurant's Executive Chef.

"I'll email it to your private chef," Michele noted.

"I forgot you and Kara are regulars here," Renato noted with a smile. He looked down three tables to where Kara sat with Renato's private secretary.

"I spoke with Monica the night of the...events...about the future of the Agency and the children," Renato began.

"I told her you were a fair man so don't make a liar of me," Michele noted.

"The public side of the Social Welfare Agency will continue, but with Padania and the Five Republics effectively eliminated and the losses Sections 1 and 2 took, I intend to close both down by the end of the year.

"I will be creating a new, official, intelligence agency and any of the current Agency staff will be allowed to join if they wish. And for those who came from the military or Carabinieri, I am open to allowing them to return to their old units if they wish."

"And the children?"

"They will live out the rest of their lives in peace...and out of the public eye. Kara, of course, will be exempt."

"A personal favor to me?" Michele asked.

"More for myself," Renato admitted. "I need a new Secretary of State and I am thinking Arturo Musso would be an excellent choice. With his appointment, however, I will need a replacement Minister of Defense and I want you to fill that role for me."

"You're not seriously expecting me to run for office, are you?" Michele asked.

"Of course not. You'd serve in my cabinet as an Independent and Kara would be part of your staff."

The Italian Council of Ministers was traditionally composed of people who were concurrently elected to the Chamber of Deputies, but since the President of the Republic formally appointed ministers (on the request of the Prime Minister), there was plenty of precedent in appointing non-legislators, who served as "independents" and were not part of any political party.

"Why can't Kara and I just retire to *Bright Star* and sail off into our own sunset?"

"Because I need people I can trust in control of State and Defense," Renato said. "The Aragons were not the only ones who might see the current situation as something they can exploit, but with those two Ministries under firm control, I can keep any mischief they might plan managed. I'll even throw in a promotion to *Generale di squadra aerea*."

"I promised my mother I would never go into politics," Michele noted.

"It's only for a few months. Once things have settled down and I have reorganized my Cabinet into one I can trust, you and Kara can go off into that sunset," Renato said.

"Now we just need to capture Cristiano and Canova," he added.

"You really plan to put them in front of a jury along with Dante?" Michele asked, unable to fully hide the surprise in his voice.

"Like you said, Michele, I am a fair man," Renato replied with a smile as he sipped his 2013 Barbaresco Costa Russi.